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OR, THE INVISIBLE HAND.

The Romance of an Implacable Mission.

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PHENIX, THE POLICE SPY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE DRESS REHEARSAL AT NIBLO'S.

It was a Monday night, about eight o'clock, and Broadway, New York City's great street, was, as usual at this hour, well-filled with people, but the famous old theater, known as Niblo's Garden, which about this time is generally one blaze of light, appeared dark and deserted.

The theater-goers who ought to be flocking into the gorgeous temple of amusement were not on hand—only a few strangers, who peered wistfully in at the entrance and perused the announcement which said:

"This theater will be closed on Monday night for a grand dress rehearsal of the great French drama

'LOGADERE.'"

"SECURE THAT MAN—DON'T LET HIM ESCAPE!" SHE CRIED, "HE HAS ATTEMPTED TO MURDER MR. MORTIMER!"

This was set forth in brilliant-hued letters, so that "he who runs may read."

It is a rare thing to close a theater on Monday night, universally regarded as one of the best paying nights in the week, but in this case it had to be done, for although the play had been originally billed to be presented on this particular Monday night, yet when Saturday came it was found that it could not be possibly got ready, so the performance was given up and a dress rehearsal substituted.

The managers of the company who were to present the play were a couple of Jewish speculators known as the Bolosso Brothers, who made a business of producing theatrical entertainments of the kind technically called "spectacular," where the scenery, music, ballet and such-like features, which appealed strongly to the eye, are more depended upon to attract an audience than the merits of either the play or the actors.

On this particular occasion the only audience that were to witness the rehearsal consisted of twenty-five or thirty people, who were seated in the parquette, critics and personal friends of the management of the house, or the Bolossos.

The curtain was up and the stage brilliantly illuminated, but the front of the house was dark, only a single light here and there being lit so that it was possible for any one to find their way from the front offices to the stage.

Behind the footlights all was bustle and confusion, the stage-carpenters were busy arranging the scenery, "property-men" were running to and fro, and the performers, arrayed in their costumes, were lounging in the "wings," as the side entrances are technically called, congregated in little groups at the foot of the stage.

A dress rehearsal is a rather rare thing and seldom takes place unless under peculiar circumstances.

In the present case as the play could not be got ready for production on this particular night, the dress rehearsal was given more for an advertisement than anything else.

The critics who were to compose the main part of the audience, were expected to go away and write a glowing account of the affair for the morning newspapers, and in order to stimulate the imagination of these sons of genius, an excellent lunch, flanked with an ample supply of champagne, had been provided in a private room in the front of the house.

A dress rehearsal is popularly supposed to be the same as a performance, but it isn't.

True, the performers are all arrayed in costume, but the prompter's table is on the stage, down on the prompt side, by the footlights, where it is out of the way, with chairs for the manager, stage-manager and prompter, and as the performance goes on it is stopped from time to time, whenever one of the men in authority thinks that a suggestion can be made which will lead to an improvement.

The rehearsal was called for eight, sharp, and at a quarter before that time, about all the performers were ready, but the scenery was not.

The Bolosso Brothers, two little, dark-skinned nervous men, with countenances which plainly betrayed that they came of the old Hebrew race, were dancing up and down in a great state of excitement.

Moses Bolosso, as the elder of the two was named, and "mein brudder, Yacob," as he usually termed the younger, were quite a contrast to the placid manager of the theater, a good type of the Anglo-Saxon race, who sat in his private box with a party of friends, taking things easy.

"Mine gootness, dose carpenters vill drive me vild!" Moses exclaimed.

The stage-hands were "setting" the great scene of the prologue, with which the play begins, the fosse of the Chateau De Caylus, the last scene in the prologue, where the hero of the play, the adventurer, Logadere, with the child of De Nevers in his arms, cuts his way through a horde of ruffians and gains the wall of the moat; the carpenters were not working as briskly as the brothers thought they ought to, but as they already had had some severe passages-at-arms with the master carpenter, a veteran who knew his business and promptly told the speculators so, they did not think it wise to say anything openly, but swore choice oaths in three or four languages under their breath.

Just as the scene was made ready the elder brother caught sight of a gentleman who had just made his appearance in the first right-hand entrance.

He was a handsome fellow, a little above the medium height, splendidly formed and with a frank, open face, one of those calculated to win favor at a glance; he had regular features, finely cut; his eyes were a deep, dark brown, which appeared to be black a short distance off; his hair was the same hue, and a silken mustache of a similar color shaded his handsome, firm-set, resolute mouth.

The brilliant cavalier dress which he wore was extremely becoming, and he looked every inch a hero as he appeared in the entrance.

This was the leading actor of the combination, James Mortimer, by name, the Logadere of the play, and universally regarded as one of the most promising actors of the day.

The elder brother perceived the young actor and beckoned to him.

"Vot you tink of dot set, hey?" Moses Bolosso exclaimed, pointing to the scene.

"Very good, indeed, very well painted and well set," the actor replied.

"Mine brudder Yacob got dot up!" the speculator exclaimed with pride. "You never saw as goot a set as dot before, hey?"

Now the actor was an inveterate joker and above all things he liked to chaff the two brothers.

"Oh, come now, that is saying a good deal!" he responded. "You ought to have seen the set that I had the first time I played Logadere, almost ten years ago; we called the piece the Duke's Motto then."

"Vas dot set better dan dis?"

"Oh, my goodness, yes!"

"Where was dot?"

"At the Grand Opera House in Mudhole, Colorado. I painted the scene myself and it was a daisy, I tell you! When I got on the ramparts my head was a foot above the sky border, and I had to hold the sky up with the point of my sword so the audience could see my face."

"Ah, yesh, dot must hafe been a great set!" the speculator sneered. "A great performance, too, no doubt. You hit 'em hard, hey, they covered the stage mit flowers und called you out!"

"Oh, the audience was very enthusiastic. When the duke's men appeared and barred my passage to the moat, one big miner in front jumped up and offered to lend me his revolver so I could clean out the 'hull gang,' as he expressed it. Oh, he was full of enthusiasm—and whisky. It took six men to put him out, and the fight I had on the stage wasn't a marker to the one that went on in front, and as to being called out, I had to answer three calls."

"Mine gootness, is dot so?"

"Yes, the first call was by the town marshal who wanted the license money; the second by the bill-poster after ducars, and the third by the orchestra, the piano-player, who declared he would not play another note until he got his money."

By this time the brothers had made the discovery that the actor was poking fun at them, and the elder growled:

"You ought to hafe been a comedian, Mister Mortimer; you vas too funny."

"Oh, no, I'm only funny off the stage; still a great many comedians are troubled that way," the actor replied.

At this point the call boy made his appearance at the prompt table.

"A party at the back door wants to speak to you, Mr. Mortimer," the boy announced.

"Oh, I'm busy now."

"Old Mike said you had better come, as he guessed as it was something important," the boy remarked.

This was a rare message to come from the aged keeper of the stage-door, whose business it had been for years to discourage all applicants.

"All right! I will come. How much time have I got?" the actor asked of the elder brother.

"We will go ahead in ten minutes if dose carpenters will get through," Moses Bolosso growled, with a look at his watch.

"Oh, I guess they will be ready; they are on the first scene now," the actor remarked, and then made his way to the back door of the theater, the entrance used by all the stage people.

As a rule, the old doorkeeper never allowed any one but those connected with the stage to pass him, compelling all who wished to speak with those in the theater to remain right at the back door, but on this occasion he had departed from his regular rule, for Mortimer found the pe son who craved speech with him on the inner passage.

It was a woman, plainly dressed, and with an odd, peculiar face.

She was a tall girl of twenty-five, or thereabouts, with a fine figure, well developed; her face was a long oval, the complexion colorless, and the firm-set mouth, with its thin lips and strong lines, gave evidence that she possessed uncommon resolution.

Her eyes were rather small, and were of a peculiar color; they were gray, yet had the property of appearing to be jet black at times.

Her hair was strange, too; it was an odd, light shade of yellow, and curled in little ringlets all over her head, more like a man's hair than a woman's, and in fact the whole appearance of the girl was decidedly masculine.

"Pardon my disturbing you," she said, when the actor appeared, in a well-modulated voice, whose tones were rather hard and harsh, though, "but I could not help doing so. Do you remember me—Hilda Serene?"

CHAPTER II.

"IT IS AN ILL WIND WHICH BLOWS NOBODY GOOD."

THE young actor gazed with a look of curiosity into the face of the girl before he replied.

"Yes," he said, after a slight pause, "your face is familiar to me; your name, also, al-

though for the moment I cannot recall just when and where I met you."

"Do you remember the Grand Opera House in Mudhole, Colorado?"

"Most certainly!"

"You came there to play a star engagement of a week with the Chicago Comedy Company, and opened in the Duke's Motto, playing Logadere, just as you are going to play it here."

"Oh, yes, I remember the circumstance perfectly well. I was speaking about it to the Bolosso Brothers only a few moments ago."

"I was in the company, and played Blanche De Caylus with you; but I only played the first night, for I was promised some money—I had not received but a couple of dollars in three weeks—and as the manager did not keep his word—he was insolent, too, when I reminded him of his promise, into the bargain—I went away, as I had a chance to better myself."

"Ah, yes, yes, I remember you now, and remember, too, what a precious row the manager kicked up the next day when he discovered that you were among the missing. He admitted to me that he was afraid to give you any money, for fear you would leave, and calculated to keep you penniless, so as to be able to retain you. The scoundrel! I had, myself, to go on a strike almost every night, to get any money out of him."

"Yes, he was a rascal, because when he had money he would not pay. There is some excuse for a man's not paying when he cannot possibly get hold of the money, but none for the man who can pay."

"Yes, he was a first-class fraud! Well, how have you been all this time?" the young actor asked, kindly.

Somehow he felt attracted and interested in the girl, although she was almost a stranger. It was not her beauty, for she was not at all beautiful, but there was something magnetic about her which was strangely attractive. If there had not been, she never would have been able to get by the old back-doorkeeper, armed with no better excuse than a desire to speak to one of the actors.

"Well, I have managed to live, and that is about all I can say," she replied, with a sad smile.

"But, if I remember rightly, you displayed considerable talent for the stage; your 'Blanche De Caylus' was a good performance."

"Yes, I got through it all right, but I don't really believe I have improved any in all these years. I am just the same as I was then, when I was a girl of eighteen, a fair, general actress, who can be depended upon for the words. I am pretty sure to get through any part for which I am cast, but I am one of those unfortunates who will never make any name upon the stage, I fear; quite different from yourself, you know, for you have risen to the front rank."

"True, almost a star, if not quite one," the young actor replied, with a smile.

"I suppose you will think me bold and presumptuous, for I have come to ask a favor of you on the strength of our slight acquaintance. I would not do it if I could help myself, but I cannot."

"Under the circumstances, then, you are excusable," Mortimer remarked gallantly.

"I arrived in New York only about an hour ago," she explained. "I have been with a company which started from Chicago, and played to dreadful bad business, as far as Buffalo, and there we burst up. The manager ran away, and I was left penniless, almost. I left my trunk as security for my board at the hotel, and the landlord, a kind-hearted German, advanced me money enough to come to New York, and when I got here, the first thing I saw after getting out of the boat was your name on a bill; the remembrance of how I met you in Colorado at once flashed upon me, and I made up my mind to come and see you, for I thought that it was possible that you could get me something to do here. I do not care what it is, you know, nor how small the salary, for I am desperately in need of something to do."

Mortimer shook his head.

"I am very much afraid that I cannot do anything for you here, not at present, at any rate, for all the people are engaged; but some of them may not give satisfaction, and there may be changes in the cast. I will speak to the stage-manager, who is an old friend of mine, about you, and ask him to make a place for you if changes are made."

"Oh, thank you, I am ever so much obliged," the girl exclaimed, gratefully. "If you will only be so kind, I will try to return the service if it is ever in my power."

"Oh, that is all right. I am always glad to speak a good word for any one whom I know to be deserving of it."

"Much obliged."

And the actress made a movement as if to depart.

"Hold on a moment! You have not given me your address, so I will know where to send after you in case anything comes up."

"My address!" And the woman smiled. "Upon my word, I don't know where I shall go! I am without friends in the city, for I have not

been in New York for five years, and then I had a furnished room with a lady who was in the same company with me, until we both got engagements."

"Will you excuse me if I remark that I don't suppose you have any more money than you know what to do with," Mortimer said, gently.

"Oh, yes, it is the truth. A single dollar is all I have in the world," the actress replied with a sad smile. "I have a few little articles of jewelry which I can pawn."

"Say, do you mind if I give you a line to the boarding-house lady where I stop?" the young actor exclaimed impulsively. "It is a regular professional boarding-house, you know, nice people and they will make you comfortable. I will tell them that you are an old acquaintance and I will be responsible for your bill."

"Oh, Mr. Mortimer, I did not even dream of asking you to do me such a favor!" the other exclaimed, a look of earnest gratitude on her face.

"Well, I know that you are all right, and when you get an engagement you can speedily settle up, and if professionals can't stand by each other it would be a pity. Have you such a thing as a card and pencil? I haven't in these togs, you know," and the actor laughed as he glanced at his handsome chevalier dress.

"Yes, take a leaf out of my memorandum-book," Miss Serene replied, producing a little book and pencil.

"I will write it in the book and you can tear it out when you get to the house."

Then he wrote the recommendation in the book.

"I am sure I shall never forget your kindness!" the actress exclaimed, earnestly, as she returned the book to her little traveling bag.

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the appearance of "mein brudder, Yacob" evidently in a high state of excitement.

In his hand he waved a letter.

"Mine gootness, Mister Mortimer, v'at you t'ink, hey? I hafe shust got a letter from Blanche De Caylus—dot ish Miss Peacock, you know—dot she cannot blay der part. She has sloped mit a young proker und started for California dis afternoon."

"Strange that a peacock should make such a goose of herself!" Mortimer observed, gravely.

"She has made geese of us to fool mit her managers in dis vay!" the speculator exclaimed in a great rage.

"Who are you going to get to do the part?" Mortimer asked, quick to improve the opportunity.

"Oh, I do not know—most of der ladies are strange to us, so we do not know if any of dem can do der part, und der dresses are all in der dressing-room too; we contracted mit Miss Peacock for to find der dresses. Mine brudder Moses is going to send to der agents for a woman, but we cannot have her here for der rehearsal to-night, und all der critics in front too, und to t'ink of dot supper und dot champagne, und der rehearsal spoiled, ach, mine gootness!" and he began to tear his hair.

"Hold on! don't get excited! Here is the very lady to step right into the position. Miss Hilda Serene, allow me to introduce you to one of the managers of this colossal spectacular enterprise, Mr. Jacob Bolosso. Miss Serene was the original Blanche De Caylus with me at the Grand Opera House—let me see, was it Chicago or St. Louis? I get the cities mixed up once in a while. I suppose, Miss Serene, if Messrs. Bolosso offered you money enough you wouldn't mind doing Blanche De Caylus for them to oblige in this emergency?"

"I should be pleased to accommodate," the actress replied, putting on her sweetest smile.

The little Jew cocked his head on one side and examined the girl very much as a jockey would inspect a horse which he thought of buying.

"Aha, you hafe got goot stage presence—you are not v'ot ish called a beautiful womans, but you will make up for der stage well," he remarked.

"Oh, yes, she is a perfect angel when she gets her war-paint on!" Mortimer exclaimed, as serious as a judge.

Miss Serene smiled, showing her teeth, so white and even, and the Jew speculator felt decidedly impressed. The peculiar magnetism of the woman had an effect upon him.

"Yesh, yesh, I t'ink you will do, if you will come for a low salary."

"Oh, yes!" the young actor exclaimed before the girl could open her mouth, "she'll come cheap, if you provide the dresses, say fifty dollars a week."

"Feefty tollars!" howled the Jew, "mine gootness, Mister Mortimer, you know better than dot! Feefty tollars! do you want to break der concern? I vash going to say ten."

"Oh, no, no, not to be thought of!" Mortimer exclaimed, never giving the girl a chance to speak. "Why, Miss Serene got more than that before she could open her mouth on the stage. You know, when you did the page in Richelieu—where was it, Cincinnati, Orleans? Well, it doesn't matter, and I say old fellow, you were to give Miss Peacock twenty-five for she showed me the contract."

"Mine gootness, Misrer Mortimer, v'ot a mans you are to tell tales out of der school," and the little Jew shrugged his shoulders until they almost went up to his ears.

"Well, I suppose, Miss Serene, under the circumstances you will be willing to take the same salary that the other lady was to receive," the young actor said with the air of a man who is asking a favor.

"Yes, I would be satisfied with that," the lady replied.

"Overture on! everybody down to begin!" was the announcement the call-boy howled forth at this moment.

"Vell, vell, it ish a bargain—twenty-five a week and traveling expenses, and one week's notice on either side! Come mit me und I vill show you der dressing-room!" the little Jew exclaimed.

And so the stranded actress got a chance for life, thanks to generous James Mortimer.

CHAPTER III.

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION.

THE Jew took the lady to the foot of the stairs which led to the upper regions and there turned her over to the call-boy with instructions to take her to Miss Peacock's dressing-room.

"You will find everyt'ing up dere," he said.

"Der lady writes that der part is on der shelf by der glass. You are not on until der last scene of de prologue, you know, and if you hurry up you vill hafe plenty of time, und to take a look at der part too. Try und get on mitout reading it on der stage if you can, for all der critics are in front und it will make der show look queer."

"Oh, I think it will come back to me as soon as I read the lines over. She has not much in the prologue," the actress answered, and then she followed the call boy up the narrow stairs.

The room was on the second landing and a little slip of paper tacked to the door bore the names "Miss Peacock, Miss Amherst."

"There it is—the overture is on, you know," said the call-boy and then he departed on a run, as was the general custom of the erratic youth.

The door was half-way open, so the actress did not knock, but entered without ceremony.

The room was a small, eight-by-ten apartment, extremely scantily furnished, for there were only three chairs and a washstand, with a double row of shelves on three sides, and the carpet on the floor was extremely shabby.

The room was occupied by a slight-figured, blonde-haired young lady, with extremely bright blue eyes, who was robed as a Gypsy.

This was the Pepita of the play, who, in stage parlance, is known as a soubrette, French for chambermaid, because her characters are usually in that line—pert, smart waiting-maid, or coquettish village beauties.

The young lady was seated by the left-hand shelf, in the center of which was a mirror, with a couple of gas-burners, one on each side.

A towel was spread on the shelf before the glass, and on it were the paints, powders, cosmetics, and various other articles considered so necessary to render a beautiful woman still more beautiful.

On the opposite shelf was a similar mirror, flanked also by two gas-jets, and a newspaper was spread out before it; the toilet articles were absent, although on the shelf, by the side of the glass, some handsome dresses were laid.

The young lady had her back to the door, and was reading when the actress entered.

"You are late, Peacock," she said, as she heard the rustle of Hilda Serene's dress, without turning her head. "I took the liberty of laying your things out for you, so you could dress quickly; but you ought to be careful and get here on time, for these Bolossos are regular cranks, and would kick up no end of a row if you should keep the stage waiting to-night."

After the peculiar fashion common to many actresses, she had left off the miss when addressing the other.

"It is not Miss Peacock, but I am much obliged to you, all the same, for I have come in her place," Hilda replied, closing the door behind her, and beginning to remove her things, undressing with the rapidity which comes to the actress from long practice.

"Oh, my gracious! you really must excuse me," continued the other, jumping to her feet, turning around as she did so, and surveying the new-comer with an inquisitive glance. "I hadn't any idea that it was not Miss Peacock."

"She has disappointed—has eloped with a gentleman to California!"

"Oh, my," exclaimed the blonde girl, with a little cry of surprise. "You don't say so? Well, now, she was boasting to me on Saturday that she had a rich young fellow on a string, and that the first thing I would know would be that she was married, and had bid good-bye to the stage forever; but I did not really believe her, you know, for you always hear so much talk of that kind from these girls who think they are extra fascinating."

"It was the truth this time. She has gone, and I have come in her place."

By this time Miss Serene had removed her dress and taken up the first costume of Blanche De Caylus.

"Let me help you, dear," the other exclaimed. "But you have plenty of time, for you are not on until the last scene of the prologue."

"Yes, I know it. I have played the part."

"Well, that is lucky."

"Yes, I played it with Mr. Mortimer at the West, and it was through his influence that I got this engagement."

"Oh, I don't like that a bit!" Miss Amherst exclaimed in the frankest manner possible.

"Don't like it?" cried Hilda, in astonishment.

"No; don't you know that Mr. Mortimer is my particular pie?" the other declared in the saucy manner of the pert soubrette.

"Indeed I did not, but you need not fear a possible rival in me, for I am sure that nothing is further from my thoughts than a love affair between Mr. Mortimer and myself, and I am certain, too, that he doesn't think of anything of the kind. Besides, with my faded, careworn face, what chance would I stand with a brilliant, beautiful girl like yourself?"

"Oh, come off with your taffy!" the other exclaimed.

While this conversation had been going on the busy fingers of the two girls had not been idle, and Hilda was speedily arrayed in the old-fashioned dress of the French court lady.

It was a hard task for Miss Amherst to hook the bodice, and she remarked:

"Well, you are finely developed, and no mistake! Emma Peacock was a big English girl, and you do not appear to be near as stout as she is, but you are; and what magnificent arms you have, and they are as hard as iron, too!"

"Yes, I have indulged in a good deal of gymnasium practice in my time, besides doing a good deal of hard work; but, I say, who is giving taffy now?"

"Oh, no, I am not flattering you." By this time the bodice was arranged, and Hilda took up the quaint, old-fashioned head-dress.

Miss Amherst assisted in the adjustment.

"Upon my word, you are going to look remarkably well. Come over to my glass and help yourself to my 'make-up.'"

By this term the actress characterized the toilette articles.

"Hallo! there's the curtain bell!" Miss Amherst exclaimed at this point.

Although the curtain was not down, the formality of ringing it up just as at an actual performance was gone through.

"You will have plenty of time to look at your part—there it is," the soubrette continued in her brisk, lively way, and she pointed to a little manuscript-book on the other's dressing-place.

"Yes, and as the part is a short one, I will be able to recover it all right, I guess."

"Oh, you can 'wing' it easily enough."

By this peculiar expression the actress meant that the scenes in which the character took part were so far apart, and her share in them so small, that the lady who played it would have ample time to study the speeches between the scenes while waiting in the "wings."

"Where do you board?" asked Miss Amherst, carelessly, more for the sake of talking than for any interest she took in the matter.

"I have not made any arrangements yet, as I have only just arrived in the city, but Mr. Mortimer was kind enough to give me a line to the lady where he boards."

"Oh, come, now! I guess I am going to have good cause to be jealous of you. Recommends you to his boarding-house, does it? Well, well, I should be in a flutter, only I happen to board there myself, so I will be able to keep an eye on you. By the way, I have a large apartment there, and you can room with me if you like."

"You are ever so kind," Hilda replied, evidently embarrassed by the offer. "And I trust you will not be offended if I am obliged to decline. I am an awful queer girl, I know; I have a strange repugnance to rooming with any one, and would infinitely prefer a little bit of a room where I could be by myself to the most spacious and elegant apartment shared with another."

"You are an odd girl! no mistake about that, as odd as you look, but I have taken a fancy to you, all the same, and I think we are going to be excellent friends, although you will not room with me. But come, let's get down-stairs and see how things are getting on. It is great fun to watch these two Bolosso brothers; they get fairly crazy if anything goes wrong, and dance up and down like a pair of jumping-jacks."

Then the two girls descended to the stage. Miss Amherst stood in the prompt wing, and Hilda found a sheltered nook a little back where she diligently studied her part.

The rehearsal went on in good shape, and when the last scene of the act came, the fosse of the Chateau De Caylus, Hilda took her place behind the painted canvas which represented the chateau.

She ascended a step-ladder, which placed her on a level with a window, through which she was to speak.

The story of the play at this point is as follows: Logadere, who is a famous duelist, has arranged to fight another chevalier of metal, the Duke De Nevers, in the fosse of the Chateau De Caylus. Blanche De Caylus is secretly married to De Nevers, and has arranged to give

their baby to the father's charge on this particular night.

Logadere arrives in the moat first. Blanche, in the darkness, mistakes him for De Nevers, calls to him and gives the child. Logadere, like a true gallant of the age, thinks a pretty woman has fallen in love with him, and when she calls him to receive the "treasure," as she terms the child, he, ripe for an adventure, receives it, but when the lady retires from the casement, is astonished to find that he has a baby in his arms.

Then comes De Nevers, eager to get through with his duel, so that he may keep his tryst with his wife, and the moment he discovers Logadere he draws his steel and attacks him, but the soldier of fortune wards off the thrusts and calls upon the duke to be careful or he will kill his child, for by this time Logadere, who has heard the rumors that De Nevers is secretly married to the beautiful Blanche De Caylus, has guessed the truth in regard to the child.

Just as Logadere finished his explanation of how he came by the child, on the ramparts of the moat appear a dozen masked men, sword in hand.

They are hired bravos led by the Duke De Gonague, who is a rival of De Nevers for the love of Blanche, and they have come with the intention of killing De Nevers, but as they advance, they are amazed to discover that Logadere is going to fight for the duke.

The villain urges them on to the attack—a fight takes place, the steel of Logadere performs wonders, for in a *melee* of this kind the adventurer is at home, the ruffians are beaten back, but the villain duke fires at De Nevers, and succeeds in mortally wounding him.

The husband falls by the gate of the chateau, and with his last breath he calls upon the soldier of fortune to protect his child and avenge his cruel murder.

Logadere takes the oath upon the hilt of his sword, then wraps the baby in his cloak. By this time the villain duke and his men are clustered upon the steps which lead out of the fosse.

"Now, dogs, give way!" cried the soldier.

"There is but one man, kill him!" responds Gonague.

The bravos advanced upon Logadere; he cuts his way through them, lays Gonague prostrate with a slash on the head and gains the rampart of the moat.

Again the bravos charge upon him, but he drives them back, utterly demoralized, and standing in triumph at the head of the steps, cries:

"I am here, stanch and true! I swear to avenge the death of Phillip De Nevers; first come the hirelings and then the master!"

It is a glorious tableau and never fails to bring the curtain down with thunders of applause.

At the rehearsal all went well. Hilda as Blanche made a good impression, she looked finely, spoke her lines with a clear, well-modulated voice, and the brothers were satisfied that she would do fully as well as the absent Miss Peacock.

The end of the prologue came, Mortimer, as Logadere, had cut his way up the steps and beaten back the ruffians with all the deftness of a man used to handling the sword from boyhood, the orchestra music became "piano" so as to allow him to speak.

With a voice as clear as a bugle's note, the actor delivered the stirring lines and as the last word came from his lips and he struck a position with the lime light turned full upon him, a really beautiful tableau, the sharp crack of a pistol was heard.

Mortimer gave a cry and staggered back, lost his footing on the narrow platform and went down between it and the scene which formed the background.

All was confusion in an instant.

Everybody rushed upon the stage.

What did it mean?

Had Mortimer been shot? It certainly looked like it!

CHAPTER IV.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SHOULDER.

EVEN the players in the orchestra, stolid Germans who were not easily excited, dropped their instruments and sprung to their feet, all eager to see what was the trouble.

All the audience were on their feet, and the manager of the theater, the ex-sporting man of other days, had not forgotten his early training, although now grown rather stout and exceedingly prosperous, and he leaped from his private box onto the stage with all the agility of an acrobat.

The drama was exciting enough but this unexpected climax beat anything in the play.

But just as everybody was on their feet, and before any one could make another move, through the door of the canvas house, the mimic Chateau De Caylus, came two struggling forms.

A brawny, thick-set, muscular fellow, with a bulldog-like head and neck, in his shirt sleeves, who looked like a scene-shifter, and to him, with wonderful tenacity, clung Hilda Serene.

At first the spectators thought that the man was trying to get away, and the girl was en-

deavoring to detain him, but at a second glance they saw that this was a mistake. The actress had thrust the man through the door, despite of his stubborn resistance. All had fled from the stage in wild affright after the shot.

The fellow's face was purple with rage, and in his right hand he grasped a still smoking revolver, and this right hand the girl held with a grip of iron, her other being fastened on his throat.

As soon as they got fairly on the stage the man succeeded in breaking loose, but in doing so loosened his hold on the pistol which dropped to the stage.

Then, with the angry glare of a demon, he turned upon the fearless girl, and aimed a terrific blow at her face that surely would have prevented her from playing Blanche De Caylus for many a night if it had alighted where he intended it should.

But with the cunning of a veteran boxer the actress threw up her left hand, warded off the blow without any trouble, then there was a momentary stiffening of the lithe, muscular figure—the "gathering together" as the pugilists term it—out shot the right arm, and the man, who got the blow on the neck under the ear on the jugular vein, received the impression that he had been struck by a fist of iron, not of flesh and bone.

He threw up his hands, staggered back and then went down all of a heap.

He had been "knocked out" as scientifically as any pugilist had ever been in a prize-ring.

An involuntary shout of approval went up from the throats of the spectators.

But the girl never heard the yells of applause.

"Secure that man—don't let him escape!" she cried, "he has attempted to murder Mr. Mortimer!"

And then with wonderful swiftness, considering that she was incumbered by her woman's skirts, she ran up the steps, gained the platform from which Mortimer had fallen, and throwing herself upon her knees peered down.

The platform was a good seven feet high, and a tumble from it for a wounded man was no joke.

But Mortimer's fall had been in some slight degree broken by the canvas scene behind him, against which he had fallen, so by the time that the girl reached the platform he had risen to his feet, considerably astonished, somewhat shaken up, but otherwise all right, as he believed.

Mortimer had just got on his feet as the actress looked down.

"Oh, Mr. Mortimer, are you hurt?" she cried.

"No, I think not, although I've had an ugly fall," he replied. "I am a little bruised, but otherwise am all right."

By this time the master-carpenter had come to the spot, and he pushed the canvas screen which represented the wall of the moat to one side so that the actor could come through to the stage.

In obedience to Hilda's injunction the man in the shirt-sleeves had been pounced upon, and was now in the grasp of the special officer of the house, a burly, red-whiskered Irishman by the name of McCormick. He was a member of the regular police force, but assigned to duty at the theater.

He had been sitting in the parquette, enjoying the show, and had rushed to the front and climbed upon the stage when the disturbance took place.

In a couple of minutes the fellow had recovered from the shock, and as he rose to his feet the officer grabbed him.

The Irishman swung his club in the air.

"Be aisy, ye blaggard, or I'll be afther layin' ye out!" he cried.

The man cast a sullen glance around at the circle of hostile faces which surrounded him, for by this time the stage was crowded with the theater people, and if any idea of attempting to escape had entered his mind, the display would surely have put the thought to flight, for the actors had their swords drawn, the supernumeraries brandished their old-fashioned weapons, and even the stage hands had armed themselves with the staffs of wood with iron at both ends, known technically as stage braces, and used to fasten pieces of scenery in their places.

If the man had attempted to offer resistance, even if the policeman had not been present, it is certain that he would have been roughly handled.

When Mortimer and Miss Serene came down the stage, the actor was warmly greeted by the manager, who was his especial friend.

"Are you all right, Jim?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I think so, although I got an ugly knock on my shoulder which pains a little," the actor replied.

"We will just have an examination into this thing!" the manager exclaimed. "Fall back, ladies and gentlemen, please, and give us room."

The crowd upon the stage obeyed, and formed a circle around the group, composed of the manager, Mortimer, Miss Serene, the officer and the prisoner, who were all in the center of the stage.

"Who is this man?" the manager asked.

"One of the scene-shifters," responded the master carpenter, stepping forward.

"I don't remember to have ever seen him before," the manager remarked.

The proprietor of the theater prided himself upon being well-posted in regard to all the details of his establishment, and so was acquainted with the hands employed.

"He is a substitute in place of John Toody," the stage-carpenter replied. "Toody is sick and sent this man with a letter, saying he had worked at the Grand Opera House, and could be depended upon, and as we were rather short-handed to-night I put him on."

"Ah, yes, I see; and now, my man, what have you got to say for yourself?" asked the manager sternly, as he fixed his sharp eyes on the face of the prisoner.

"Oh, not much," the man replied with a sullen, defiant air, "only you are kicking up a big row about nothing."

"About nothing, eh?" the manager cried. "Well, I must say that you are a pretty cool hand! Do you call attempting to kill a man nothing?"

"I didn't try to kill anybody!" the fellow exclaimed.

"You did not?"

"No."

"Well, upon my word, I must say that your cheek beats anything that I ever came across!" the manager declared.

"Hold on! don't be in too big a hurry!" the man said, in an extremely cool way. "It was an accident."

"An accident!" cried the manager, and the bystanders all eagerly inclined their heads to listen.

"Yes, an accident; why should I want to hurt this man?" and the fellow nodded to Mortimer. "I never saw him before—I have not got anything against him, and I think he will say that is the truth."

"How is that, Jim?" the manager asked.

"He certainly speaks the truth," the young actor replied. "I never saw the man before to my knowledge."

"How could I have any grudge then against a man that I don't know?" the fellow demanded.

"The how of it was this: I was knocked down and robbed almost a month ago while going home from the Grand Opera House late one night, so I got a revolver in order to protect myself, and I was just looking at it—fooling with it, you know, when the thing went off in my hands. Then the next thing I knew this woman collared me, and then dragged me upon the stage," and the fellow looked at Hilda in a puzzled sort of way, as though he was wondering how on earth she managed to do such a thing.

"An accident, eh?" exclaimed the manager, who did not know what to make of the story.

"It may have been an accident," Mortimer remarked. "But I was certainly under the impression that the bullet came within a foot of my head, for I heard it whistle, and it was so near that I thought I was hit, and in some way lost my balance and tumbled off the platform."

"You were wounded by the bullet," Hilda remarked, speaking as quietly and impassively as though this startling scene was a mere every-day occurrence.

"The ball tore through the shoulder of your coat, there is the hole," she continued, placing her hand upon Mortimer's left shoulder. "And it cut the flesh, too, for your coat is wet with blood!"

This announcement created a deal of excitement.

"Well, I thought I was hit at the time, or else I would not have fallen from the platform, but after I picked myself up, I concluded that it was not so, and though I felt a pain in my shoulder, I fancied I had wrenched it by my fall."

While he was speaking, the actor had taken off his coat, and Hilda, with the air of one who knew all about such things, examined the wound.

It was plain that she was different from the majority of girls, and that the sight of blood had no terrors for her soul, for the shoulder of the fine stage-shirt that the actor wore was stained crimson.

"The wound does not amount to anything—it is only a scratch," Hilda announced. "The bullet just grazed the flesh enough to draw blood, but did not go deep enough to do serious harm. If I had a bit of court-plaster, I could soon fix it all right."

As it happened, the old stage-carpenter had a supply in his wallet, and Hilda soon completed the dressing of the wound.

The spectators looked on with the greatest interest, and the man who had made the trouble, surveyed the young actress from under his overhanging, beetle brows as if she was some curious puzzle that he could not solve.

"Well, my man, this wound don't seem to bear out your story that you discharged the revolver by accident," the manager remarked, gazing sternly upon the scene-shifter.

"I can't help that—I am telling you the truth!" the man declared, with a sullen face.

It may be that the revolver was pointed toward him at the time it accidentally went off, and that is how he happened to get wounded."

"Sir, this story is a falsehood from beginning to end!" Hilda exclaimed, addressing the manager. "This man made a deliberate attempt to shoot Mr. Mortimer, as you will see after I tell you what I saw. After my scene was over I descended the steps and stopped by the door so as to see the rest of the scene. This man was there, and I presumed, of course, that he was attending to his duties. I could see that he did not like my remaining, and after a minute or two, he asked me if I couldn't go in the next wing below as I would be in the way when the time came to strike the scene. I knew that this was merely an excuse to get me to go, for there would not be anything done until the act ended.

"I complied with his request—that is, I left that entrance, but instead of going into the entrance below, I went to the one above, and by squeezing myself in between two of the scenes I was able to watch him without his being conscious of it.

"I fancied that he was up to some mischief, for I noticed that he watched me when I left the entrance as if to see where I was going, and so I tricked him by pretending to go to the entrance below, but I took advantage of the darkness to steal into the one above.

"From my place of concealment I saw him draw the revolver, raise the hammer and take deliberate aim at Mr. Mortimer, resting the pistol upon his left arm so as to make sure of his shot, and I believe the bullet would have inflicted a fatal wound had I not jumped forward just as the man fired, and so disturbed his aim; then I seized and dragged him through the door; the rest you know."

"It is a lie!" the man cried, angrily. "The gal has put up this job on me just so as to make out that she has done something big. But I will be even with you for this night's work before I get through with you!"

The face of the actress seemed to harden suddenly—dark lines appeared upon it; the gray-black eyes appeared to turn a peculiar green, like the orbs of a beast of prey, and she fixed them upon the face of the boaster in a way that fairly made a cold chill run over him.

"You scoundrel! if you ever dare to cross my path again, I shall kill you!" Hilda Serene said, in low, measured tones.

And there was not one within the sound of the woman's voice who had any doubt that she would be as good as her word, yet there was nothing sensational—no bravado, in the girl's manner.

There was silence for a moment; it was as if the actress had cast a sort of spell upon the assemblage.

The Irish policeman was the first to speak.

"Shall I be after takin' him off, Mr. Gilmore, an' havin' him locked up?" he asked.

"Yes, do so, and Mr. Mortimer will appear in the morning against him," the manager replied. "And then perhaps we will be able to get at the bottom of this strange affair."

The man asked that he be permitted to put on his coat, which request was granted, and then he departed in charge of the officer.

CHAPTER V.

THE "COP" IS ASTONISHED.

The policeman marched his prisoner through the back door of the theater into Crosby street.

McCormick had a firm hold of the man's coat collar with his left hand, and in his right he swung the locust club which the average New York policeman know so well how to use.

The "cop," to use the slang appellation which the toughs of the metropolis apply to the guardian of the peace, had no fear of the prisoner escaping from his strong grasp, for McCormick was a good man when it came to a hand-to-hand struggle, and was much more than a match for the scene-shifter.

"Now, my bould bucko, ye had better be after takin' the matter aisy, an' goin' along wid me like a gentleman, unless ye want to git a taste of this stick of mine an', upon me wourd, I don't think ye will find it pleasant," the officer warned as he took his prisoner from the theater into the street.

"Oh, that is all right," the other replied in a sulky way. "I am not going to make any trouble, but will go along as quietly as a lamb. I ain't at all afraid! I kin get out of this scrape easy enough; they can't do anything to me, for it wasn't anything but an accident, and that woman lies when she says she saw me fire the revolver at the actor. Holy smoke! but she is a terror though! I ain't reckoned to be a weak man, and I have had some scraps in my time with good boys, and I allers managed to hold my own pretty well, but I could no more do anything with this woman when she grabbed me than if it had been the champion, John L. Sullivan, whom I had run up against."

"True fer yees!" the officer exclaimed. "She is a foine slip of a gurl, do ye mind, an' whin she give it to ye in the neck, begob, ye wint down like the ox before the butcher!"

"I never run up against such a woman before, and I don't want to again in a hurry!" the fellow declared. "Hang me! if she ain't got muscles jest like a prize-fighter, and when she give me

that lick in the neck I felt as if I had been hit with a club."

"It was a foine stroke; there's no mistake about that, an' ye kin take yer oath that the gurl net only knows how to hit out straight from the shoulder, but is after understandin' where to put the blow so as to have it do the most good."

"I don't want her to hit me again, the she-devil!" the other declared. "Cuss me if she ain't a good deal more like a man than a woman!"

"Arrah! don't ye be after findin' so much fault wid a mumber of the weaker and tinner sex!" exclaimed the policeman with a grin.

"Weaker sex!" cried the prisoner. "Well, all I have got to say is, that no man ever took hold of me in such a way, and she has got a fist like iron."

By this time the two had got to almost the middle of the block.

Crosby street, at this part, is not particularly well-lighted, and the officer tightened his grip upon the prisoner's coat-collar for fear that the fellow might attempt to make a dash for liberty in the gloom.

There were eight or ten people in the rear of the two, attracted by the sight of them, but the officer paid no particular heed to them, for there are always loungers at the back door of a popular theater, and an arrest, even made in a quiet backstreet is sure to cause a small crowd to gather.

But all of these fellows were not ordinary loungers, attracted by the morbid curiosity which leads people to follow an officer who has made an arrest, or to stand and stare when an ambulance rolls by, as McCormick soon discovered to his cost.

As soon as the policeman and his prisoner came into the gloom, one of the men, who was right at the officer's heels, a tall fellow, brought his hand down violently on the top of McCormick's helmet, driving it down over his eyes, and at the same moment a second man, who was armed with a short club, hit the policeman a terrific blow on the arm with the hand of which he grasped the prisoner.

With a yell of pain the Irishman released his grip and the captive took to his heels immediately.

Then a third man, in the rear of a stolid German, who was following in the procession out of pure curiosity, with a violent push sent the German against McCormick with such force that both of them went headlong into the gutter; the Irishman at the time was turning so as to grapple with his assailants, and had just lifted his hat from his eyes when the German came against him like a battering-ram, and, of course, it was the most natural thing in the world for McCormick to jump to the conclusion that the German was one of his assailants.

The policeman was on his side in the gutter crushed under the weight of the fat German, who weighed a good two hundred, but he managed to get his right arm free and aimed a violent blow at his supposed assailant, and if the club had alighted on the German's head where McCormick had intended it should, it would sadly have damaged that worthy citizen, but an accidental movement on the German's part spared him the blow; the club struck the curbstone, and the concussion broke it short off close to the Irishman's hand.

Dropping the club, McCormick caught the German by the throat and rolled him over, the man not attempting to resist, but bellowing to be spared at the top of his lungs, frightened almost out of his wits by the unexpected peril in which he had become so suddenly involved.

Perceiving that he had nothing to fear from the foe the policeman released his grip on the German's throat as soon as he got out from under him and sprung to his feet.

By this time quite a crowd had collected, attracted by the fight, and it was growing bigger and bigger, every moment.

McCormick was in a fearful rage, and pulling out his revolver, glared around in search of his prisoner and the men who had attacked him, but none of them had waited to see how the German would fare. All had taken to their heels and, by this time, were safe from pursuit.

"Where's the blaggard who was after knocking me hat over me eyes?" the policeman demanded, wild with rage. "Where's the spalpeen who belted me on the arm wid a club?"

These were conundrums that no one in the crowd felt inclined to answer, but the circle widened a little when the men who composed it saw how angry the policeman was, for they were a little afraid that he might take it into his head to charge on them, and New York police officers when in a passion are justly regarded as dangerous men.

As McCormick had not seen his bold assailants, of course it was not possible for him to pick them out, even if they had been in the crowd, but as he saw no evidence that any one present had any idea of interfering with the majesty of the law, and was desirous of making an example of somebody, he arrested the unfortunate German and lugged him off to the police station and there made a charge against him of interfering with an officer in the discharge of his duty.

As it happened, the sergeant in command was a sensible man and took pains to inquire into the affair, and the result of the examination was the discharge of the German, much to the dissatisfaction of the Irishman, who could not get the idea out of his head that the German was not in some way connected with his assailants, who had managed to rescue the prisoner in such an extremely skillful way.

"Begob! if I liver lay me two hands on that scene-shifter ag'in, I will not l'ave a whole bone in his body!" McCormick declared.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN-WOMAN.

AFTER the policeman departed with his prisoner, the rehearsal went on again and it came to an end without any incident worthy of notice transpiring.

Of course, as was only natural after what had happened, Miss Serene attracted more attention than anyone else, although in the main part of the play the character she assumed was that of an old woman, for there is an elapse of sixteen years between the prologue and the drama proper, and in the drama the child that the soldier, Logadare, receives in the prologue is a charming girl of seventeen, who has been brought up by him, and of course they fall in love with each other, and Logadare's efforts to restore her to her mother and foil the malice of the villain duke, who seeks to keep the girl out of her heritage, is the interesting feature of the play.

Blanche De Nevers, as the girl is called, was played by a very charming young woman, Miss Georgia St. Clair. This lady and Mortimer were old acquaintances; they had played together a great deal, and Miss St. Clair, more interested in the young actor than she would have liked to confess, took an immediate dislike to Hilda Serene.

During the last scene of the play there were some minutes when Mortimer and Miss St. Clair being together on the stage had a chance to exchange a few words, not being concerned in the action of the play just then.

Miss St. Clair noticed that the young actor's eyes were fixed upon Hilda's face, and the peculiar expression upon Mortimer's features did not please the young lady.

"Do you think she is pretty?" Miss St. Clair asked, abruptly.

"Eh?" exclaimed Mortimer, with a start, evidently roused from a brown study. "Who do you mean?"

"Why, this new lady, you know," and Miss St. Clair nodded to Hilda.

"Well, I don't think she would impress anyone as being particularly beautiful with that ugly white wig on," he replied.

"Oh, I don't mean as she is made up now!" the actress exclaimed, a little impatiently, for she fancied that Mortimer was evading her question. "I mean, do you think she is pretty off the stage—as she was in her first dress in the prologue?"

"Well, I suppose you will think it strange, but, upon my word, I have never troubled my head about the matter. In fact, I never noticed her looks; but, now that you speak of it, and want my opinion upon the matter, I must say that although she is not pretty—and could not be by any stretch of the imagination be called beautiful, yet she is by no means bad looking."

"To my thinking she is dreadfully coarse and masculine," Miss St. Clair remarked, in quite a spiteful way. "And if I did not know that she was a woman, I should think she was a man, dressed in woman's clothes!"

"Oh, you are clearly prejudiced!" Mortimer exclaimed, laughing.

"I am sure she handled that scene-shifter just like a man, and she used her fist as well as any man could."

"Well, you know it is a popular fad nowadays for ladies to take fencing and boxing-lessons, and only the other day there was a regular prize-fight between two women."

"The horrid creatures!" Miss St. Clair exclaimed, in disgust.

"Yes, I should think that it was a tough proceeding; still it is not a bad idea for a woman who is possessed of sufficient muscular strength, to know how to take care of herself, in case she is attacked by a ruffian. I fancy, from the display that Miss Serene gave of her abilities in that line to-night, that it would take a pretty good man to get away with her, to use the common saying."

"Well, I think she is a horrid, bold thing, and I don't like her at all!" the young actress declared.

"Oh, come now, you are too severe!" Mortimer declared. "And do you think that it is really fair to come to a conclusion so quickly—to decide on so short an acquaintance?"

"Well, I know very well I never shall like her!" the other replied, with a pout. "And I don't think she is much of an actress either."

"She is doing very well; she certainly is fully as good as Miss Peacock, and even if she possessed great talent, she could not well display it in such a part."

The business of the scene now requiring the attention of the pair put an end to the conversation; but it will be seen that there was a person

holding a leading position in the theater who was not disposed to look with friendly eyes upon the new-comer.

After the rehearsal was ended, the performers repaired to their dressing-rooms to remove their costumes.

When Hilda reached her apartment she found that Miss Amherst was dressed for the street.

The Gypsy girl was not on at the end of the play, so she had had time to remove her costume, and put on her street dress.

"You got through very well," Miss Amherst remarked as the other entered. "No one would have known that you were taking the part at short notice."

"It is very good of you to say that, but I am afraid that you are flattering me," Hilda remarked, as she began to remove her things.

"Say, Miss Serene, I have a crow to pick with you!" Miss Amherst exclaimed, abruptly.

"With me?" the other asked in surprise.

"Yes, no one else. Do you know what a good many people down on the stage say about you?"

"Indeed I do not. I cannot imagine!"

"Well, they say that you are not a woman at all, but a man in disguise," Miss Amherst said, and she surveyed the face of the other with her sharp, blue eyes in the most searching manner as she spoke.

"Oh, that is nothing new," Hilda replied, smiling. "That has often been said of me. It is unfortunate, I suppose, that I should be so masculine in my appearance, but I cannot help it. I was born that way. In one of the western companies that I was with we ran short of gentlemen at one time, and I played all the young lovers—the love-sick walking gentlemen, you know—and I appeared so like a man—a rather effeminate one, of course, that no one in the audience suspected the truth."

"Come, honest, now—aren't you a man?" Miss Amherst asked, half in jest, half in earnest.

"I am as much a woman as you are, dear, unfortunately," Miss Serene observed, with a sad smile.

"Why do you say unfortunately?" Miss Amherst demanded, somewhat astonished. "Would you rather be a man than a woman?"

"Yes, a thousand times, yes!" the other declared, emphatically.

"Well, I wouldn't!" Miss Amherst exclaimed. "And I cannot for the life of me understand why any woman should prefer to be a man rather than a woman."

"If you were like me you would understand it, and when you come to know me you will comprehend, for in all things, save the accident of birth, I am more a man than a woman," Hilda replied in her earnest way. "I take no pleasure in the quiet home delights which are so dear to the feminine heart. Dress has no attraction for me. Jewelry I despise, and I would almost rather be whipped than go shopping any day."

"Oh, what a horrid creature you are!" Miss Amherst exclaimed, in mock horror. "I begin to believe that you are not a woman after all, although you certainly appear like one now, but then there was that circus-rider, you know, Ella—Ella Something-or-other, I don't remember the last name, who fooled people for years. Everybody was ready to swear the rider was a girl, but in time it was found that Ella was a man."

"Well, I ought to have been a man, but I am not," Hilda remarked, with a sigh. "As I tell you, I am not a bit like a woman in my tastes. I take no delight in the things that the average girl loves, but all manly sports are my passion. I can box, shoot, fence, wrestle, ride, jump, and run with any average man; ay, more than hold my own, for it takes an expert to outdo me."

"I can readily believe that, after the exhibition that you gave to-night!" Miss Amherst exclaimed. "Why, the way you handled that great, big man was truly wonderful! When you struck him he went down like a log. I really thought you had killed him."

"Oh, no, I knew where to strike him," Hilda responded, with a smile. "All I was after was to put him to sleep—as the boxers say—for a while. I might have accomplished the feat by a right-hand swing on the point of the jaw—that is another professional boxer's term, dear—but from the way the man stood I had a better chance to get my blow in on his jugular, and when a skillful boxer lands a hit there, it generally puts a man to sleep."

"My goodness, you awful thing!" the sourette exclaimed. "You talk as if you had the science of the whole prize-ring at your fingers' end."

"Well, it is as I have told you," Hilda replied with a smile. "I take an interest in such things. Oh, I ought to have been a man!"

"Yes, I begin to believe so; but here is another thing that I don't understand," Miss Amherst remarked, a puzzled look upon her face. "Even supposing that you know all about boxing, how is it that you, a woman, can muster up courage enough to attack a big, burly man?"

"Oh, there has been plenty of women since

the world began who have shown as much courage as any man has been known to possess; the pages of history are full of the names of women of dauntless metal from the days of Judith, who slew the tyrant, Holofernes, downward.

"Besides, the conditions were not so uneven as you seem to imagine," Hilda continued. "You, yourself, remarked upon the largeness of my arms and their peculiar hardness. All the rest of my body is in proportion. You would hardly believe it to look at me but I weigh a hundred and forty pounds, and it is all solid bone, muscle and good, hard flesh, hardly an ounce of fat upon me. If I were in training for some great muscular feat, I could not be in better condition."

"That I can readily believe."

"So, really, while this man may be ten or twenty pounds heavier than I, yet in muscular strength and condition he could not compare with me, and he was almost as helpless in my grasp as a rat in the teeth of a terrier."

"That is true enough, and the look of amazement on his face when you dragged him upon the stage, in spite of his resistance, was almost laughable."

"Oh, I tell you I ought to have been a man!" Hilda declared in a tone of decided conviction.

"Dame Nature made a terrible blunder when she decreed that I was to be a girl. Why, Miss Amherst, do you know that I never knew what it was to feel the slightest symptoms of what the French called the grand passion?"

"What? is it possible that you have never been in love?" the other cried.

"Never!"

"And yet—forgive me for saying so, dear—but you are not quite as young as you might be."

"That is true; I am no young chicken, as the saying is, but a woman of twenty-eight."

"Well, I am over twenty, but I guess I have been over head and ears in love a dozen times!"

"A candid confession is good for the soul!" Hilda remarked.

"It is the truth. I am not exaggerating!"

"Well, I have never been in love in all my life. I do not know what the meaning of the word is. I have had friends, both men and women, whom I have liked, but, as a rule, I have fancied the women a great deal more than I have the men."

"I say, I hope you are going to like me!" Miss Amherst exclaimed in her frank way.

"For I have taken a fancy to you, although you are a great, horrid man-woman!"

Hilda laughed, and as she was ready for the street by this time the two left the room.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MARK ON THE HAND.

At the foot of the stairs the girls encountered Mortimer and the manager of the theater, who were busy in conversation.

The actor introduced Hilda to the manager who complimented her upon getting through her part so well under the untoward circumstances; and then referred to the courageous manner in which she had collared the scene-shifter.

"I acted upon the spur of the moment of course," Hilda replied, "for as it was I had no time for consideration."

"And the scoundrel managed to escape after all," Mortimer remarked, and then he told how the prisoner had been rescued from the officers in Crosby street.

"Why that is very strange!" Hilda exclaimed, knitting her bold, prominent brows in thought.

"Yes, it is indeed strange," the manager replied.

"It would seem to indicate a deep-laid plot!" Hilda declared.

"A plot!" exclaimed Mortimer, while the manager looked amazed.

"Yes, do you not see?" the actress exclaimed, rather astonished that what seemed so clear to her was not plain to the others. "The man had confederates waiting in the street; they were there on purpose to rescue him in case he should be captured, and they did enable him to make his escape."

"Yes, by Jove! I believe you are right!" the manager exclaimed. "I say, Mortimer, you and I were rather dull not to have jumped to this conclusion."

"Yes, we were rather stupid," the actor remarked. "But there is no doubt that Miss Serene has hit upon the truth."

"Oh, yes, evidently there was a deep-laid plot, and it was aimed against you too," the manager observed.

"I confess that I am utterly in the dark!" the actor exclaimed with a shake of the head. "I have not an enemy in the world, that I know of, to bear me hatred enough to attempt my life."

"But this man intended to kill you if he could!" Hilda declared in her firm, decided way. "He took careful aim at you, and there was murder in his face if ever it was written upon a human countenance. I would not be positive about the matter if I had not been so near the

man and therefore was able to watch him closely."

"It beats all the mysteries that I ever had anything to do with!" the manager exclaimed.

"How unfortunate that this fellow was able to escape too!" Mortimer remarked. "If he had been committed to jail, when the examination came on we might have been able to get something out of him. But, as it is, he is gone, and I don't suppose we will be able to catch him again, no matter how hard we try."

"It will be a difficult matter, I suppose, to apprehend him," the manager observed in a thoughtful way. "We might put the detectives on the case. I know half a dozen of the best men on the force, and the superintendent is a particular friend of mine."

"I fancy that the job would be rather a difficult one, for the fellow is a common-looking rascal, such as can be met with on every block in the city," Mortimer said.

"I am sure that I would be able to identify the man if I ever saw him again," Hilda remarked.

"Well, I presume that the circumstances of the case would be apt to fix the man's face in your memory," the manager observed.

"Yes, and then the man has a peculiar mark on his hand, which I noticed when he was leveling the revolver at Mr. Mortimer," the actress explained.

"A mark on his hand, eh?" Mortimer exclaimed.

"Yes, on the lower side of his right hand, or, to speak more correctly, midway between the palm and the side, quite near the wrist; the mark is a small hand, a light pink in color, seemingly tattooed on the flesh in sailor fashion; an almost invisible hand, one might say; for it is so faint in color, and situated in such an odd place, that only by accident it would be likely to be noticed."

"Well, that is an odd kind of a mark," the manager declared. "It is tattooed, of course, for though tattooing is usually done with India ink, yet it can be worked with vermilion, too, for I have seen an old sailor upon whose brawny arm an American flag was tattooed in colors, and the red was fully as brilliant as the blue."

"Yes, that is true, I have seen cases of the kind," Mortimer coincided.

"So, you see, if the man is ever apprehended, I will be able to identify him without any trouble," Hilda declared.

"Yes, no doubt about that," the manager asserted. "Well, I will see the superintendent to-morrow and get him to put some detectives on the case. I will admit that the strangeness of the affair has greatly excited my curiosity, and I would like to have the mystery solved."

"I cannot throw any light upon it!" the other remarked. "As I said before, I have no enemy to my knowledge who bears me enough ill-will to attempt my life. Of course, I have trodden upon some toes in my time; few men attain any success without doing so, but none of the parties would be likely to commit a murder for the purpose of squaring themselves."

"It is a regular mystery, Jim, and no mistake! If you keep on you may find yourself the hero of a romance yet!" the manager remarked.

"The man was not one of your regular scene-shifters, but came as a substitute?" Miss Serene said, in a reflective way, knitting her heavy brows.

"Yes," the manager answered.

"Have you the address of the man in whose place he came?" Hilda asked.

"Yes, the back-doorkeeper has it," the manager replied.

"Would there be any objection to my getting the address, so I could call upon the regular man and see what he knows about this stranger?" Hilda asked.

The rest looked at her in surprise, for the request struck them as a particularly novel one.

"Oh! I see! you want to do a little detective business on your own hook!" the manager exclaimed.

"I am a woman, you know, and therefore curious," the actress replied, with a smile.

"Well, I think it is a good idea for you to look into the matter," the manager remarked, after turning the matter over in his mind for a few moments. "I think, from what little I have seen of you, Miss Serene, that you have a decided talent for detective business. You understand how to reach a conclusion in a speedy manner, and I should not be surprised if you were able to get to the bottom of this matter as quick as any detective on the force."

"Ah, now you are over-rating my poor abilities," the actress replied. "But I confess I would like to look into the affair, for it is my belief that it will be found upon examination that there has been some trickery about this substitute. I suspect that the man gained entrance here for the express purpose of endeavoring to kill Mr. Mortimer, and that when it is sought to ascertain who and what he is, no knowledge can be gained."

"Well, Miss Serene, all I have to say is, that if it turns out to be so, you are more than a detective, you are a first class fortune-teller!" the manager declared.

There was a general laugh at this, and then

the party proceeded to the back-door where the address of the absent stage hand was procured from the doorkeeper.

Miss Serene made a memorandum of it in her little book; then the manager bid them good-night, and Mortimer with the two ladies departed.

"It is not far to our home," the actor remarked as they walked up Crosby street. "It is in Great Jones street near the Bowery."

CHAPTER VIII.

BAFFLED.

THE three went up the street to Houston and then turned and proceeded toward the Bowery. It was a few minutes to eleven o'clock and the streets were still full of people for in that region late hours are kept.

"You will find our boarding-house a very pleasant place," Mortimer remarked as they walked along. It is almost strictly a professional house, for it is seldom that any outsiders stop there. Mrs. Clifton is an old time-actress and understands how to take care of professional people.

"Oh, yes, she is just as nice as she can be!" Miss Amherst declared in her brisk way.

"I'm sure I shall be very comfortable there, and I am ever so much obliged to you, Mr. Mortimer, for recommending me to the good offices of the lady," Hilda said, and the manner in which she spoke showed plainly that she considered herself to be under deep compliment.

"Now you speak as if I had done you the greatest kind of a favor when, in reality, the weight of obligation is on my side!" Mortimer protested.

"Oh, no, Mr. Mortimer!" Hilda exclaimed, quickly.

"Oh, but it is! there is no doubt about it!" the young actor persisted. "I but cast my bread upon the waters and it was returned to me tenfold, literally fulfilling the Scriptural prophecy. I will call upon Miss Amherst to be the judge."

"You had better not take me for a judge!" the soubrette declared, pertly. "I am a true woman and shall stand up for my sex, so I will be sure to decide that Miss Serene is right, even if I know she is in the wrong."

"You do injustice to yourself I am certain!" Mortimer declared, gallantly.

"The matter is hardly worth risking a decision upon," Hilda remarked in her serious way. "I came to New York, alone and friendless, no engagement, no prospects of getting one, and very little money. Mr. Mortimer aided me to secure this position, for if he had not kindly spoken for me I would not have got it."

"And then you speedily repaid that service by saving my life!" Mortimer exclaimed. "For I am firmly convinced that if you had not interfered with the fellow, at the moment he fired the shot, the ball instead of merely scratching my shoulder, would have probably pierced my heart. I got Miss Serene a situation and she saved my life. Now is there any comparison whatever between the two services?"

"And you want me to decide?" Miss Amherst asked.

"Yes," the young actor replied.

"And are you satisfied to leave it to me, Miss Serene?"

"Oh, yes, although it is really not worth bothering you about."

"All right; since you are both willing, you shall have a verdict as is a verdict, and I do not doubt it will greatly surprise you!" the lively soubrette exclaimed, vivaciously. "This court decides that Miss Peacock is entitled to all the credit, for if that gay bird of Paradise had not eloped with her Wall street broker—became a Pacific sloper, so to speak—there would have been no vacancy in the company at Niblo's; Miss Hilda Serene would not have got her position, Mr. Mortimer could not have recommended her, and she would not have had an opportunity to make a heroine of herself by engaging in mortal combat with a bloody-minded stage hand. Miss Peacock is justly entitled to all the credit, and the judge to the oysters as soon as a good-looking oyster-house is reached."

Both Mortimer and Miss Serene laughed at the unexpected decision.

"No appeal from this court, I suppose?" the actor remarked.

"No, sir; our decisions are like the laws of the Medes and Persians, unalterable; but if you promise me champagne with the oysters, maybe I might be able to do something for you!" Miss Amherst added, archly.

"Oh, no; I could not bring myself to be guilty of attempting to bribe so excellent a judge," Mortimer replied, laughing. "Besides, champagne is too rich for your blood; you are not a blonde burlesquer; you ought to be satisfied with beer, or Scotch ale, at the most."

The soubrette made a grimace.

"Mr. Mortimer, I hate to say it, but I believe you are really getting stingy!" she declared. "Beer, indeed! Do you take me for a member of the German Opera?"

Hilda had not paid any attention to this passage-at-arms, but had contracted her brows in thought, and at this point she said abruptly:

"This number in Second street where the stage-hand lives is it not near the Bowery?"

"I don't know how the numbers run, but I should not be surprised if it was," Mortimer answered.

"Would it not be possible for us to go there to-night?" Hilda asked. "Is it not wise in a case of this kind to strike while the iron is hot?"

"It is rather late," Mortimer observed. "Still, being a stage-hand, it is probable that his people are accustomed to late hours."

"It will not do any harm to make the trial, and it will only take us but a short distance out of our way," Miss Serene urged.

"You have the true instinct of the bloodhound, which leads you to want to take the trail at once," Mortimer observed. "But, as you say, it cannot do any harm, and we will go there."

"This is quite romantic—on the trail of a mystery!" Miss Amherst declared in a melodramatic way. "And I am with you to the death, but I want it distinctly understood that if there is any fighting to be done, Miss Hilda here is to do it. That is not in my line."

"Oh, you need not be alarmed!" Mortimer said, laughing. "You will not be called upon to do anything of that kind. But I really think, Miss Serene, that you ought to take charge of the inquiry for you certainly have displayed positive genius in the detective line."

"Very well, I will be glad to do it, although I fear now that you are making fun of me," Hilda replied.

"No, he isn't!" Miss Amherst asserted. "He is in downright sober earnest, and I only wish he would make the discovery that I have a genius for something, but that, I am afraid, is something which no one will ever be able to do."

"Oh, you wrong yourself!" Mortimer declared with a perfectly grave face. "You have genius for one thing."

"And what is that, I would like to know?" the girl demanded. "I fancy that you have some trap for me now!"

"Sticking your unfortunate friends for the oysters!" the young actor responded with a comical glance.

"Ah! didn't I know you were going to say something ugly?" Miss Amherst exclaimed, pouting. "I know what you are trying to do; you want to get me angry so I will say that I will not eat your old oysters, but that game will not work, for I am just hungry for oysters, and as you promised to get me some I shall hold you to your bargain!"

"Oh, that is all right; I will not back out. You will find that I am a man of my word!" Mortimer declared.

And so, chatting pleasantly as they walked, the party went on to the Bowery, crossed it and proceeded to Second street.

The house they sought was not far from the Bowery, an old-fashioned brick house, now let out in floors.

"Do you want us to come in with you?" Mortimer asked, as they halted in front of the dwelling.

"No, I think you had better remain here," Hilda replied. "I think I will be able to get along better alone."

She went up the steps; an old man was sitting in the doorway smoking a pipe.

Of him Hilda inquired.

"John Toody? Yis, ma'am, on the top flure," was the answer.

Up the stairs went the actress, and when she reached the top floor she knocked at the first door she came to.

It was soon opened and a middle-aged woman appeared.

"Does Mr. John Toody live here?" Hilda asked.

"Yes, ma'am," responded the woman, surveying the visitor with surprise.

"I am connected with Niblo's Garden, and the manager wished me to call and see why Mr. Toody was not on hand to-night," the young actress said in the most matter-of-fact way possible, just as if she had been accustomed to such errands all her life.

The expression upon the face of the woman changed immediately.

"Yes, ma'am, come in and sit down, and I will tell you all about it; excuse me for keeping you standing at the door, but I didn't know what your business was, and I thought it so strange that a young lady should come inquiring after my husband."

Hilda entered and accepted the chair that the woman brought.

"I thought that the theater people wouldn't like it if my husband staid away, but then as it was only a rehearsal to-night, and a substitute went for him, I reckoned, maybe, that it would not make much difference."

"The man who came in Mr. Toody's place did not give satisfaction, and the manager was curious to know why your husband did not come."

Hilda could see that the woman was troubled and hesitated before she spoke.

"Well, miss, I ain't a-going to tell you any lie," she said at last, "for I think that a party ought to tell the truth, no matter what happens."

My old man takes a drop of something to drink once in a while, but it isn't once a year that he lets the liquor get the best of him; but a man brought him home about seven o'clock to-night, and, miss, he was that full, that he couldn't speak. I never saw my old man so bad before; he was jest paralyzed."

"Oh, what ever will I do," I said to the man, 'there's a rehearsal at the theater to-night, and if my husband is not there, maybe he will lose his job.' This was arter we got John on the bed, you know, and he was like a dead man. 'Oh, that is all right,' said the feller. 'I am a stage-hand from the Grand Opera House, and as I am not working this week, I will go to Niblo's in his place. Write me a bit of a note to the master carpenter and sign your husband's name to it,' and, of course, thinking it no harm, and wanting to keep the job for my old man, I did it, miss."

"Who was this man?"

"His name is Finn—Thomas Finn, ma'am."

"Ah, you know him, then?"

"Not I; sure, I never set eyes on him until he brought my husband in at the door. He told me his name to put it in the letter."

"Your husband knows him, probably?"

"No, he doesn't, for he come to himself awhile ago, and was that sick that I thought he would die, and I ax him what got into him to go off on a spree with this Finn, and how was it that he was paralyzed and the other man wasn't, and he let on that he didn't know the man from Adam. He jest met him in the saloon, and they had a couple of drinks together, and then my old man said his head began to feel queer, and the man said he would help him home, and that is every blessed thing he knew until he woke up that sick that I was near frightened out of me life."

"It certainly is very strange," Hilda observed. This was for the purpose of leading the woman on, for as she thought she understood the game which had been played as though she had planned it, it was not strange at all to her.

"Yes, and my old man can't get it through his head at all!" the woman declared. "It is not like as though he wasn't a drinking man at all, and not used to liquor, for he is, and for him to be paralyzed with a few drinks of beer with a couple of whiskies on top of the beer, is wonderful. It has been an awful lesson to him, miss, and I don't believe that he will get off again for a year, so if you will kindly tell the theater people jest how it is, and how I did my best to send a man in his place, so that they wouldn't be bothered, 'coz I didn't want my old man to lose his job, I will be much obliged."

"Oh, that will be all right," Hilda remarked, reassuringly. "I will see that a proper explanation is made. You need not be alarmed about your husband losing his situation." And Hilda rose to depart, having ascertained all she cared to know, although, apparently, she had not gained any information at all.

The woman was profuse with her thanks as Hilda quitted the apartment, which the actress accepted in her quiet way as if it was all a matter of course.

When Miss Serene joined the others in the street they proceeded to retrace their steps.

"Well, what luck?" Mortimer asked.

Hilda laughed; the declaration of the theater-manager had just come to her mind.

"Really, I hesitate to tell you," she said. "I was just thinking of what Mr. Gilmore said. And when he learns the results of my investigation he will be sure that I am a witch."

"Is that so?" the young actor asked.

"Yes, for the affair has turned out exactly as I predicted."

Miss Amherst gave utterance to a little cry of amazement.

"Why, isn't that strange?"

"I think Mr. Gilmore is right; you certainly are a witch!" Mortimer declared.

"Witch or no witch I was correct in my calculations. The stage-hand, who is a drinking man, was met in a saloon by a stranger with whom he drank; only twice the wife says, but the liquor rendered him stupidly drunk, and the stranger brought him home; the liquor was drugged, of course; the stranger said he was a Grand Opera House man, and volunteered to take the stage-hand's place, getting the woman to write a note introducing him, and this is all the wife knows of the matter; the husband, recovered deathly sick by the drugged liquor, recovered his senses sufficiently to declare that he knew nothing whatever of the man."

"The inference is plain, then, that the stage-hand was drugged by the stranger so that he could take his place behind the scenes at Niblo's," the young actor remarked, thoughtfully.

"Yes, and you remember that I predicted that it would not be possible to gain any information in regard to the man. I was satisfied then that it was all a deep-laid plot, and that the man gained entrance behind the scenes for the express purpose of murdering you," Hilda declared.

"The position he selected, behind the set house, was one well-calculated for the purpose. No one was near him; all were watching the scene from the lower wings, and after the shot was fired it would have been an extremely difficult matter, in the confusion, to fix upon the

exact spot from which it had come. There was a little trap in the stage by the set house where the gas hose comes through when it is used. I noticed that this trap was open—I have a wonderful faculty for noticing these little things—and the moment the man produced the pistol, and I saw that he intended to fire at you, I immediately suspected that he opened the trap so he could drop the revolver through it after the shot was fired; then, if he happened to be suspected of having discharged the shot no weapon would have been found upon him."

"Yes, I see," Mortimer remarked, astonished at the faculty with which the girl grasped all the circumstances of the case.

"The chances were great, though, that he would not have been detected unless some one was at hand and witnessed the discharge of the weapon, and I was the only soul in the neighborhood."

"It is truly a mysterious affair, and the more I reflect upon it the more puzzled I become," the actor remarked. "It does seem as if a desperate attempt had been made to take my life, and yet I know of no reason why any one should wish to do me harm. I have no deadly enemy; I am not in any one's way, as far as I know, and the crime seems to be one without a motive."

"Yes, but there is a motive, and a deep one, or such an assassination would never have been attempted," Hilda declared. "And if I were you I would be upon my guard, for it is likely that a second attack may be made."

"If the detective succeeds in arresting this scene-shifter he may confess," Mortimer suggested.

Hilda shook her head and smiled.

"I will assume the witch's role again, and predict that the man will not be caught," she said.

"Well I confess I am rather of that opinion myself," the young actor admitted.

"It is a very mysterious affair," Miss Amherst declared, with a wise shake of the head. "And I feel satisfied that the more we talk about it, the more puzzled will we become, and, as far as I can see, there is no place where the oysters come in, and there's a perfectly lovely saloon across the street."

"Come over, for heaven's sake, and get your oysters!" Mortimer exclaimed. "And then we will have some peace."

After the refreshments were dispatched the party repaired to the theatrical boarding-house, where Hilda procured a room.

Time passed on; Logadere was produced and proved to be a success; Miss Serene played her part to the satisfaction of all concerned, but it was evident that she spoke the truth when she declared that she would never be a great actress. She understood her business, but lacked the divine fire of genius.

But as a witch, as the manager remarked, she was a big success. Her prediction in regard to the stage hand proved to be true.

The best detectives in the city were employed, but no trace could they find of the man who had called himself Thomas Finn.

CHAPTER IX.

A GILDED WIDOW.

AND now we must go back a little and describe a certain scene which occurred about a month before the night on which the dress rehearsal took place at Niblo's Garden.

The city of New York is truly a cosmopolitan metropolis; all nations, all classes, are represented, and he who wishes to study character cannot find a better field, whether he seeks the millionaire or the beggar.

It is a purse-proud city, too, and nowhere in the world is the mighty dollar more worshiped.

We hear a great deal nowadays of the exclusive set who have been dubbed the 400, and the members who proudly fancy that they belong to this mystical number, and that they are the blue-blooded aristocracy of the metropolis, loudly claim that the mere possession of wealth cannot secure an entrance into their charmed circle; but this declaration must be taken with a grain of salt, as the saying is, for it is an undoubted truth that if a family comes to New York with a vast amount of money, and their past reputation is not too bad, there are very few social circles in the metropolis to which they cannot gain admittance.

To illustrate, we will take the case of a beautiful blonde, a woman of forty, but extremely well-preserved, so that she did not look to be within ten years of her age, a queen-like woman, with a magnificent form, a regal-looking face which was lit up by as handsome a pair of dark-blue eyes as ever a woman boasted.

The popular name for this fascinating creature among the young bloods of the town was the "Gilded Widow."

She was the relict of old David Darlington who came to this country some thirty odd years ago as the secretary of the agent of one of the English steamship lines.

Darlington was then a man over thirty-five, a close-fisted, shrewd, hard-headed Englishman. He prospered in the New World, and rose step by step until he became the American agent for the line, and during the war he used the com-

pany's funds which were in his hands, in addition to his own, in speculation, and as he was on a rising market he accumulated great wealth, so by the time the eighties were reached he was commonly believed to be worth three or four millions.

Then this confirmed old bachelor, now beginning to show signs of natural decay, and more cranky and obstinate than ever, surprised all who knew him by going off to England and returning with a wife, a young and beautiful woman; she was thirty about at this time, but did not look to be over twenty-two or three.

A descendant of one of the first families in England, he proudly announced to his friends, one with the blood of all the Howards in her veins; but to his intimate associates he admitted that although her birth was one that entitled her to admission to the best society in England, yet her own immediate family could not boast of much wealth.

Of course this speedily got around and society shrugged its shoulders and exclaimed: "Ah, it is the old story over again; Age and Mammon has bought Youth and Beauty!" But society was very kind to the new-made bride though, and few of the exclusive doors of the metropolis were closed against her.

A beautiful English woman of high descent and backed by two or three millions of dollars, it was no wonder that she was a great social success.

The old man did not long enjoy his bride, for about a year before the time that our tale begins the old man died, leaving a will bequeathing to the widow all his property.

The moment the death of the old man was announced great curiosity was excited to know exactly how much money the old man had left, but this curiosity was not destined to be satisfied. It was just as if the old man had anticipated the desire of the public at large to pry into his affairs and had determined to disappoint the seekers after knowledge.

To the widow and the old lawyer, who had always attended to Darlington's legal matters, was left the task of settling up the estate, and as neither of them were disposed to talk about the matter, so, outside of these two interested parties no one knew how much the old man left.

The widow behaved with strict propriety; were mourning for a full year, and did not appear in society until that period expired; then she yielded to the solicitations of her "dear friends," and once more became an ornament of that circle in which she had been wont to shine, but now it was with a new splendor, for although old Darlington provided a magnificent house in Fifth avenue, in the neighborhood of the Central Park, and had elegant horses and carriages, yet he was rather close with his wife in regard to her allowance, not being able to get away from the frugal notions rendered necessary by the struggles of his early life.

Now that she had full swing, she became one of the recognized leaders of fashion, and cut so great a shine in the New York's gay world that the young bloods soon bestowed upon her the name of the Gilded Widow.

She laughed when the knowledge of this came to her ears.

"Oh, no, that is not right!" she declared. "Not gilded, but pure gold!"

There is envy and malice everywhere, of course; the higher the station and the greater the display, the more it is provoked.

Ill-natured feminines, who could not hope to rival the dashing widow, shrugged their shoulders when she became the subject of conversation, and declared they understood what her motive was in making all this display—she wanted another husband. She had married for money—sacrificed herself, of course, and now she wanted a man somewhere near her own age, and, acting upon this impression, all the fortune-hunters who could gain an entrance to the charmed circle of society, laid vigorous siege to the wealthy widow.

It soon became apparent, though, that if the Gilded Widow wanted to re-enter the matrimonial state, she had no idea of doing so with any penniless suitor, for she gave a decided cold shoulder to all who essayed to gain her smiles who could not boast a good, big bank account.

Then the censorious world gave tongue again, and declared that with the dead man's fortune, the widow had inherited his avarice.

There was one exception to the rule which the Gilded Widow had apparently formed that none but wealthy gentlemen would be allowed in her train.

One man who could not boast of money she favored with her smiles.

A young Englishman, who bore the name of Leander Brakespear, a fellow of good family, but of no fortune—that is, nothing to speak of, as he himself freely admitted.

All the wealth was in another branch of the family, and as there were a dozen heirs between himself and the money, there was very little likelihood of his ever coming in for any of it.

He had a small estate, which produced an income sufficient to keep him in fair style, four hundred pounds a year, or about two thousand dollars in our American money, as he frankly

explained; enough to enable him to live like a gentleman, but not to indulge in much extravagance.

To the ordinary man, who toils hard for his living, forty dollars a week would seem to be a princely sum; but to a gentleman who thought it necessary to live in bachelor apartments, have a valet to wait upon him, dress in the height of fashion, and keep a horse, forty dollars a week does not amount to much.

True, the young man was a Wall street broker in a small way, made heavy books on the races, and being an excellent judge of a horse, usually won. Then he was a fine card-player, and equally expert at billiards, and so contrived to pick up considerable money, and he managed his game in such a way that no one could accuse him of being a card-sharp, or of endeavoring to take advantage of men not as skillful as himself. In fine, the man was a high-toned English gentleman, whose only fault, as far as any one could see, consisted in not possessing money.

There was no doubt that he was what he represented himself to be, for the great metropolis has grown suspicious of late years of English importations, and is careful to ascertain that the English milord is the genuine article and not his valet in disguise, before awarding him a hearty welcome.

But Brakespear was all right; the English consul was personally acquainted with his family, and all the evil that he knew of the man was that he had lived in such a manner in England, and on the Continent, that his expenditures had far exceeded his income, and the importunities of his creditors had driven him across the water.

But to run in debt to your tailor and have a bill at the hatter's which you cannot meet is no crime, in fact, the fashionable young gentleman rather considers that it is about the right thing to do, so this circumstance did not diminish Leander Brakespear's popularity.

In person, the Englishman was about the medium size, well-formed and tolerably muscular. Had a round, good-looking English face, with a rather heavy jaw, which denoted that the man had a will of his own; his hair was light in hue and slightly curly, his eyes a grayish blue, the only bad feature of his face, for they were small and restless, and somehow detracted greatly from the rest of the countenance.

He had a decidedly English look, so that a judge of nationalities would not have been in doubt in regard to his country, yet when he spoke, had none of the peculiar drawl—the doncher-know style which the American ass adopts, thinking that by so doing he will be taken for an Englishman.

On the contrary, he spoke as good, pure English as any Bostonese in the land.

Such a fellow as Brakespear ought to have made a rich match with some of our American beauties who have the wherewithal to enhance their charms, but somehow he did not seem to be successful with the ladies.

Perhaps it was because he paid such ardent attention to the Gilded Widow, and the young buds of society resented his overlooking their charms for those of the wealthy Mrs. Alberta Darlington.

Possibly he thought he stood more chance with the widow than with the young girls, but the wise-heads, who had been acquainted with Mrs. Darlington ever since the old man introduced her to New York society as his wife, laughed at the idea that she would ever be foolish enough to marry the penniless Englishman.

But when they were questioned why it was, that if she had no serious intentions regarding him that she permitted the man to dance attendance upon her, they were at fault.

It was a question they could not answer; she had some object in view, of course; they all agreed as to that, for her acquaintances had learned that the Gilded Widow was very shrewd and extremely far-seeing; not the sort of woman to make a blunder, but what the object was they could not guess.

It was afternoon at the time we introduce the two to the notice of our readers; they were seated by one of the parlor windows in Mrs. Darlington's Mansion, gazing out upon the endless procession, promenading up and down the avenue.

Brakespear had just called and had been conducted to the widow's presence, who invited him to take a seat by her at the window, and expressed her pleasure at seeing him.

"I am glad you have come," she said. "I have been out of sorts this afternoon, and wanted some one to talk to," she remarked, carelessly pulling the ears of the silken-haired Skye-terrier, which nestled in her lap.

"I am very glad that I came then," the Englishman remarked, delighted at his favorable reception.

He had called for a particular purpose this afternoon, and the words of Mrs. Darlington he took as omens of success.

He had made up his mind to bring matters to a crisis. For three months he had been paying the Gilded Widow the most devoted attention, and he thought that it was almost time that he ascertained how she really felt in regard to his suit.

"Yes, I have been very dull and listless, and I needed some one to entertain me."

Here was a favorable opportunity to introduce what he wanted to say, and he was quick to improve it.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Darlington, if you would only give me the right to be always by your side I feel sure I could drive the dull spells away!" he declared in low, deep, earnest tones, and then he cast a glance around, as if he wished to assure himself that he could speak without danger of being overheard.

The widow understood the meaning of the glance.

"Do not be afraid; you can speak freely," she said. "No one can play the eavesdropper here. This is not one of the cheap modern houses, where the walls are so thin, and so poorly constructed, that a conversation in one room can be overheard in another. When the doors are closed, as at present, you can speak with perfect assurance that no one will hear your words but the person to whom they are addressed."

"I am glad of that, for I have something to say to you which is to me of the utmost importance, and it is intended for your ears alone."

She looked at him for a moment, her keen, dark blue eyes full of merriment.

"I think I can guess what you are going to say, Mr. Brakespear," she remarked. "And I suppose you might as well say it first as last. I am no bird to play the embarrassed maiden at what I had foreseen must come some time, so, go ahead and speak."

The gentleman was considerably surprised at the frankness of this speech, and his keen wits took the alarm, for he did not consider that it was encouraging, still, as he had commenced he had determined to go on.

"You are very kind," he said. "You must have seen, Mrs. Darlington, that your beauty and your goodness have made a deep impression upon me, and though our acquaintance is not a long one, yet since it has existed I have learned to esteem you above all women whom I have ever met. I have striven to show you by all means in my power how much I prize your friendship, and now I have woken to the knowledge that if I were to be deprived of your society the world would be a dreary blank indeed to me. May I venture to hope that the time will some day come when you will be willing to allow me the proud privilege of guarding you from all cares and troubles?"

The widow laughed merrily, not at all affected by the seriousness of the gentleman.

"My dear Leander, you do it extremely well!" she exclaimed in the most familiar manner possible. "I presume that since I laid aside my widow's weeds between twenty and thirty gentlemen have done me the honor of offering to relieve me from all future cares, and I am certain that not one of them proposed as nicely as you have done."

The Englishman felt annoyed by both the widow's words and her manner.

"Mrs. Darlington—Alberta—do not misunderstand me! I am really and truly in earnest!" he exclaimed.

"Oh, yes; I understand that, but, my dear Mr. Brakespear, you are not so much in earnest as to be capable of going and doing something desperate if I refuse your offer, eh?" the widow asked, archly.

"Well, Mrs. Darlington, if you put it that way, I don't know as I would be the sort of a man to go and hang my harp on a willow tree, even if my suit were to be rejected by the woman I loved," Brakespear replied, the widow's frankness being contagious.

"Oh, no; you are too sensible a man to do anything so foolish!" she declared. "If you were not we would not be as good friends as we are."

"Really, you flatter me," the Englishman responded with a bow.

"No, no, it is the truth, and to tell the truth is not to flatter!" she exclaimed. "Now, in regard to your proposal, Mr. Brakespear, I shall not beat about the bush at all, but will be frank, plain and straightforward with you, and you must not be offended at what I say."

This was not a promising beginning, but the gentleman concealed his uneasiness, and said that he was quite sure that she could not say anything to offend him.

"Well, I don't know about that—truth is sometimes very unpleasant," she remarked, dryly. "But as I think that, under the circumstances, we had better come to an understanding, I will say what I have on my mind."

"Certainly! speak with the utmost frankness, I beg!" the gentleman exclaimed.

CHAPTER X.

THE BROTHERHOOD MARK.

ALTHOUGH the gentleman spoke as though he was really anxious to learn the lady's view, yet, in reality, he did not like the situation at all, for he had an impression that he was going to hear something unpleasant.

He was a man quick to detect the approach of danger, and the idea had come to him that a blow was about to fall, but as to exactly what shape it would come in he had no conception.

"Now, Mr. Brakespear, I am going to be really brutally frank with you, and you must not be offended, for I assure you that I have a good reason for acting as I do," was the startling announcement that the widow made.

"Any one who has the pleasure of your acquaintance, Mrs. Darlington, knows that you are too intelligent to adopt any course without a good reason!" the gentleman declared, gallantly.

"Thank you for the compliment," she said, with a smile. "Mr. Brakespear, let me ask you in the frankest possible manner, supposing I had been a woman utterly without fortune, would you have desired to make me your wife?"

"Oh, Mrs. Darlington surely you do not think that it is your wealth that alone has attracted me?" he exclaimed.

"No, no, I am vain enough to believe that my personal appearance had something to do with it!" she replied. "I do not doubt that you would have admired me even if I had not been worth a dollar, but to admire a woman is one thing and to marry her is quite another."

"Come now, be honest with me, as I shall be with you! If I were poor you could not afford to marry me, no matter how beautiful and attractive I might be. When poverty comes in at the door love flies out of the window, you know."

"Yes, that is very true, I will admit that. I presume that if you had not been situated as you are, I should have hesitated to pay my addresses to you, for I am a poor man and on my limited income could not possibly support a wife in any kind of style; still, I hope that you will not look upon me in the light of a fortune-hunter."

"Oh, no, a man should have his wits about him when he falls in love—or to speak correctly, when he thinks of marrying," the lady remarked. "For a man to marry a penniless woman, and he himself without fortune, is little better than a crime, for he dooms both himself and the woman he marries to a life of misery."

"Yes, you are right."

"Now if I was poor you could not afford to marry me?"

"No, I fear not, though your beauty and accomplishments would be apt to make a man do desperate things."

"A truce to compliments!" Mrs. Darlington exclaimed a little impatiently. "We are talking business now, not dealing in sentiment."

"Yes, yes, of course," responded Brakespear, who did not know what to make of the widow.

"And as you are poor, I cannot afford to marry you, even if I loved you, which I do not," she remarked, frankly.

"Do not be wounded by my bluntness," she continued. "It is no discredit to you that I have not been impressed with your attentions. I do not think the man lives upon the earth who can make an impression upon me. You must remember that my marital experience has been a peculiar one: I was an old man's darling, which, in nine cases out of ten, means an old man's slave!"

And the proud lips of the woman curled with anger as she spoke.

"It was so in my case. I was truly a slave to all intents and purposes, although my chains were golden ones, but they were chains, just the same, and fettered my movements fully as much as though they had been forged of iron. And now that my master is dead I am not free, although at first I thought I was, but he arranged his affairs in such a way that I am confined to a certain income, and if I should marry that would be forfeited, so you see, that, under the circumstances, I could not afford to marry you, nor you to marry me."

Brakespear looked decidedly glum; this was a revelation as unexpected as it was disagreeable.

"Upon my word I had no idea that you were so situated!" he exclaimed.

"You are the only one, with the exception of the lawyer who doles out my money to me, who knows the facts in the case, and I rely upon you to keep the matter a secret."

"You may depend upon my discretion," the gentleman declared.

"My position is an intolerable one!" she exclaimed, impatiently, her beautiful face disfigured with the evil lines of passion. "My income is not half large enough to satisfy my wants. I am over head and ears in debt, and although my creditors do not trouble me for payment, because they think that I am a very rich woman, and that the reason I do not pay promptly is because I am careless and pay little attention to money matters, yet if they once got an idea of how I am really situated they would be after me like a pack of hungry wolves!"

Brakespear was amazed at the utter freedom with which the woman spoke, and the better nature of the man impelled him to caution her.

"My dear Mrs. Darlington, do you think that it is wise to make these disclosures?" he said.

"I am, of course, greatly flattered at the confidence which it shows you have in my discretion, but I trust you will pardon me if I say you are acting foolishly to trust anybody with such vital secrets. I am an old and experienced man

of the world, and, believe me, I know of what I speak."

The woman burst into a laugh, but one in which there was little merriment.

"Upon my word you are not a bad fellow to take the trouble to warn me not to place myself in your power!" she exclaimed. "Well, it shows that the good opinion that I had of you was not without a strong foundation."

"But do not be alarmed. Do not jump to the conclusion that I cannot take care of myself, for I can; no woman in this world better able, for what I have not seen of life, both high and low, is not worth seeing."

"You astonish me!"

"It is the truth; and now I am going to show how much I trust you by revealing another secret."

A look of surprise appeared on the Englishman's face. This woman was a riddle.

"Where do you suppose my husband found me?"

"I haven't an idea!"

"Behind the bar of a gin palace in Birmingham!" the woman exclaimed with bitter accent.

"Is it possible?"

"It is the truth. I was a bar-maid, although the blood of one of the oldest families in England is in my veins. My father at one time was well-to-do—had a flourishing factory in a little village in Lancashire, but in an evil hour he took a nephew in as manager, and the man repaid the kindness by bolting to America with all the money he could lay his hands upon."

"The blow killed my father; he was an old man and was not able to bear up under the calamity; my mother speedily followed him into the grave, and I was cast upon the cruel mercies of the world. I was then only about eight years old; the wife of a man who kept a public house in Birmingham happened to take a fancy to me and, being a childless woman, adopted me; with them I remained, taking my place behind the bar when I grew old enough."

"It was not a very nice public either, for among the police it bore the reputation of being a house-of-call for thieves, and many an unfortunate wretch have I seen taken out of the tap-room by the detectives."

The face of Brakespear darkened and a peculiar look came into his eyes.

The woman was watching him with the eyes of a hawk, yet she did not betray that she noticed the change in his face.

"I suppose you see now I was right when I told you that I had seen a deal of life," she said.

"Yes, and I am simply astounded!" he replied.

"When I was twenty, both of my protectors died suddenly, and as they were heavily in debt nothing came to me. But the new man who took the place was glad to have me remain, and there I stayed until my pretty face caught Mr. Darlington's fancy, and he transplanted me from the gin-palace to his Fifth Avenue mansion; the Birmingham bar-maid took a place among the matrons of New York!" and then the woman laughed merrily.

"My dear Mrs. Darlington, I can hardly believe that this story can be true!" Brakespear exclaimed, earnestly. "And if it is, you are the most imprudent woman in the world to trust such a secret to any one."

"Oh, I am not afraid to have you know it," the woman answered, carelessly. "I feel sure that you can be trusted."

"It would be wiser to keep the knowledge to yourself!" he persisted.

"What a pretty scarf-pin that is that you wear!" she exclaimed, abruptly. "And such an odd device, too! The beautiful hand of a woman, exquisitely beautiful, done in gold, and clasping the tiny diamond between the thumb and the forefingers. It is really charming! Do you know that I took particular notice of that pin when you were introduced to me. I noticed the pin before I even glanced at your face."

Brakespear seemed ill at ease, although he strove not to appear so.

"Oh, it is a mere bauble. I picked it up somewhere for a trifle. It is a very common device; you will see a dozen of them in every jewelry store."

"Yes, I have seen the ones to which you refer, but they are not at all like yours. You must take notice the next time you see them, and you will soon detect the difference."

"Oh, there cannot be much," he replied, and as he spoke, he watched Mrs. Darlington in a curious way out of the corner of his eye.

She did not seem to notice his scrutiny.

"Your scarf-pin reminds me of a strange incident that occurred when I was serving behind the bar," she observed. "As I told you, our public-house did not bear a good reputation among the police, and they were right in their suspicions that a number of our constant customers were men whose way of life was crooked."

"I remember one young fellow in particular to whom I took quite a liking. He wanted me to marry him, but I had no mind to link my fortunes with that of the boldest cracksmen in Europe; his name was Brumagen Bill!"

Brakespear's nerves quivered, but slight as was the start, it was not unnoticed by Mrs. Darlington.

"Why do you start?" she asked. "Is the name familiar to you?"

"Ye—yes; I think I have read it in a police report. It was some years ago, across the water."

"The man's right name was William Hodges," she remarked. "He was a good-looking fellow, with dark hair, and a round, rosy, English face. He was taken by the police—caught red-handed, robbing a country bank in Yorkshire; was sentenced to transportation for life, and, I suppose, poor fellow, that he is in Australia now, if he has not died meanwhile. It was nearly twenty-five years ago that Brumagen Bill wanted me to be his sweetheart. I was a girl of fifteen then, and my hair was dark. I had not bleached it to its present color."

"Dear me! how time flies! It seems only a year or two ago since this young fellow—he was only a couple of years older than myself—used to tell me how he fooled the police, and 'cracked his cribs' as he used to say; you see I have not forgotten the thieves' argot. He was quite a hero in my eyes."

"He too wore a pin the shape of a woman's hand, and one day, when he was in a confidential mood, he told me that there was a story connected with the pin."

"It was the badge of a secret society of criminals, known as the Brothers of the Invisible Hand, and it was the custom of the members of the band to wear some article of jewelry in the shape of a beautiful woman's hand, so that they would be known to each other, and all who joined the organization took a fearful oath in which they bound themselves to aid by all means in their power any brother who should be in distress."

"Quite romantic!" Brakespear observed; by this time he had entirely recovered his composure.

"Oh, yes, and then it is true, too, but then you know, truth is always stranger than fiction."

"I believe you are right."

"And then, in addition to wearing the golden hand badge, all members of the organization, at the time of joining the band, had a dainty woman's hand tattooed somewhere upon their person in light vermilion, so that it is a faint pink in color after a few months have elapsed."

"Quite an odd mark."

"Yes, twice since I have been in America—twice since I have been the wife of David Darlington had I seen the brand of the Invisible Hand," the lady remarked.

"The first time was when I was coming up Fifth avenue just at dusk one day. A man snatched my pocketbook from my hand and made off with it. He was pursued and captured, but had managed to turn the book over to a confederate so that it was not found upon him when he was searched."

"He was brought before me to be identified. I was just about to say, 'Yes, that is the man, take him away!' when I caught sight of a faint pink mark on the fellow's throat. I approached him, apparently for the purpose of making sure that he was the party, but in reality to see if he did really bear the brand of the Invisible Hand, and when I saw that there was no mistake about the matter, to the amazement of the fellow, I declared that I did not think he was the man, and would not be willing to swear to it."

"And so he went free?"

"Yes. The next time I saw the mark was when a gentleman happened to bend his head so that I could look down upon it, and there, just over the right ear, in among the roots of the hair, I saw the Invisible Hand shine. I knew exactly where to look on this occasion, for a lady of my acquaintance has the mark in the self-same place."

"Yes, I understand," Brakespear said, with a smile. "And now that you have made this explanation, I suppose you have something else to say?"

Mrs. Darlington nodded assent.

CHAPTER XI.

THE MILLION THAT WAITS FOR AN HEIR.

THE Gilded Widow took a slip which had been cut from a newspaper from her pocket-book, and handed it to the Englishman.

Brakespear read it aloud.

"Information wanted of the next of kin of Nathan Smith, of Houston, Texas, lately deceased, supposed to have been a native of Birmingham, England. Address White & White, Houston, Texas, U. S."

"This man has left an estate, I presume," the Englishman remarked, after he had finished the reading of the notice.

"Yes, over a million of dollars!"

Brakespear started in amazement.

"Is it possible?"

"Yes, no doubt about it whatever, and that million now, in the State of Texas, waits for an heir."

"Well, as a rule, when a man dies worth a million of dollars, it is not generally necessary to advertise for heirs; they spring up like mushrooms!"

"In this case no one has come forward."

"That is strange!"

"No, for Nathan Smith is not the full name of the dead man. There have been about a thousand Smiths to see the lawyer, so they told me, but none of them were able to make out that they were in the slightest degree related to this Nathan Smith."

"You have seen these lawyers, then?"

"Yes, I went to Houston on purpose, and learned all the particulars of the affair."

"But I do not understand," Brakespear remarked, puzzled. "Why do you take any interest in the matter?"

"It is easily explained. I told you of a nephew of my father who absconded with my father's money, and really drove both my father and mother into an untimely grave."

"Yes, I remember."

"The name of that nephew was Nathan Smith Throckmorton."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"After his flight my father put detectives on his track. He was supposed to have sailed for America, and in time the detectives discovered that he was believed to have taken refuge at Houston, Texas. They sent for money, so as to be able to go on there, and bring him back. When the tidings reached England, both my parents were dead, there was no one to act for me, the orphan, and so the search was given up, and the rascal went free."

"Yes, such is the case very often; it takes money to get justice in this world."

"By accident I happened to see this next of kin advertisement. I remembered that the detectives believed the absconder had taken refuge in Houston, Texas, and I immediately jumped to the conclusion that this Nathan Smith was my runaway cousin, so I went on there and investigated the matter."

"And you discovered that it was so?"

"Yes, the rascal had found refuge at that distant point, and then as time passed on, and no attempt was made to pursue him—undoubtedly he saw by the English papers that both my father and mother were dead—he went into business, started a factory exactly like the one in England, which he had ruined, and in time acquired a colossal fortune; every penny of it, too, rightly belongs to me, for it was by the aid of the money which he stole from my father that he was able to start his factory."

"But can you prove that this Nathan Smith and your cousin, Nathan Smith Throckmorton are one and the same?" Brakespear asked.

"Oh, yes, without any trouble; there is plenty of evidence, which I, who know all the facts in the case, can get at, but the lawyer, working in the dark, without any suspicion that Nathan Smith was not his full name, will never hit upon the truth."

"Yes, I see; the case seems to be a plain one. You must go to Houston, reveal the truth to the lawyer, and claim the property. Upon my word, a million of dollars will come in very handy to you just now," and the Englishman rubbed his hands briskly together with a deal of satisfaction.

"Oh, no, I cannot do that."

"Why not?"

"To allow the lawyer to know the true facts of the case would be to take the money completely out of my reach."

"How so?" Brakespear exclaimed.

"I am not the next of kin."

"Oh! is that true?"

"Yes, there are two heirs certain who come in before I do, although, justly, it all ought to come to me. I consulted counsel when I was in Texas to see if it was not possible to bring a suit as my father's kin to recover the stolen money, but I found that it was too late."

"Ah, you can trust these lawyers to have all sorts of quibbles in the laws so that it is a hard matter to obtain justice, no matter how good the case is, unless you pay as much as the thing is worth," the Englishman exclaimed, in a tone which indicated that he had little respect for either law or lawyers.

"Nathan Throckmorton had three sisters who came to this country before he did, and all three married here—Agatha, Katherine, and Martha. The moment I discovered that there was a million at stake I employed detectives to ascertain all they could in regard to the sisters."

"That was wise."

"Of Agatha and Katherine I found traces; both are dead, but left children. Martha has utterly disappeared, and I was not able to find out anything in regard to her—whether she is alive or dead—although the presumption is that she is not living, but she may have left a large family behind."

"Very likely she did," Brakespear observed.

"It is the unexpected that always happens, and as there is a million of dollars waiting to be claimed, the chances are that Martha's descendants will number a dozen or two."

"I do not think so," Mrs. Darlington replied. "When last heard from she was living in San Francisco, and from the fact that no word has come from her, or from any child of hers for fifteen years, it would seem to indicate that she is dead, and that she left no heirs."

"Yes, that is certainly a fair inference to draw," the Englishman observed, thoughtfully.

"Do you comprehend the situation now?" Mrs. Darlington asked, her voice growing unconsciously deep, and she cast a glance full of meaning at Brakespear as she spoke.

"Yes, I think I do. In the first place there is a million of dollars—"

"Over a million really!"

"We will confine ourselves to round figures. Between you and that million stand two lives."

"Yes—two only!" And again a dark look, full of fearful meaning was on the face of the woman.

"Who are the two?"

"One of the two, the elder, is the child of the oldest sister, Agatha; he is an actor by profession, and I saw by one of the morning journals that he is to play the leading part in a new play soon to be presented at Niblo's Garden."

"His name?" Brakespear asked, and he got out his memorandum-book.

"James Mortimer."

"Do you know anything about him?"

"Nothing!"

"Now for number two."

"A young girl, employed as a saleslady in Ridley's drygoods store on Grand street."

"And her name?"

"Katherine Martha Green."

"Named after her mother and her aunt?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything about her?"

"Yes, I went and bought some goods so as to be able to see what she was like. She is a tall, rather pretty girl, dark like a Jewess; and boards in Grand street near Essex."

Brakespear finished his memorandums, and then reflected a moment.

"Both of the parents of these two parties are dead?" he said.

"Yes, all the sisters died young."

"As long as this actor and this saleslady live, you stand no chance for the million?" the Englishman mused.

"Not the slightest!"

"If they should die—and human life is very uncertain, you know—there is not anything that can prevent you from obtaining all the estate?"

"Only the appearance of Martha, or Martha's heirs."

"Humph! I don't like the Martha business at all!" Brakespear exclaimed.

"It is the unknown danger that is always terrible!" Mrs. Darlington declared.

"If the chance of accident should take this actor and saleslady out of the world, and you claim the Texas estate, produce the proof that the dead man was your cousin, and then, just as you get everything nicely arranged, if this Martha, or Martha's heirs, should make their appearance, it would be remarkably awkward?"

"Yes, but we will have to run that risk. I cannot see any other course open to us," the woman remarked, reflectively.

"No, there isn't anything else that we can do; we must go ahead and take our chances. Did you employ detectives in San Francisco to see if any clew to Martha, or Martha's heirs, could be found?"

"Oh, yes, you may be sure that I did not neglect a single point."

"And no information was gained?"

"No, not the slightest. Martha and her husband, George Cauldwell, a jeweler by trade, left New York about fifteen years ago for San Francisco, and from that time to this no word has ever come from them."

"Did they have children?"

"Three, two girls and a boy."

"Would they be of age now?"

"Yes, all of them."

"That is ugly—extremely ugly!" Brakespear exclaimed with a doubtful shake of the head. "It may be possible that the children are all married and have families of their own, then there would be a dozen heirs to claim a share in the estate."

"Yes, and any one of them would come in before me," Mrs. Darlington observed, a dark and ugly look upon her beautiful face.

"The first move to be made is to advertise in all the leading newspapers between here and the Golden Gate for information in regard to the heirs of George Cauldwell; we will not mention the woman, for his heirs are hers."

Mrs. Darlington shook her head.

"No use," she said.

"Why not?"

"I have tried it."

"And without success?"

"Not the least! The advertisement was cautiously worded, so as not to excite suspicion, but no word came from the right George Cauldwell, although plenty of wrong ones answered."

"Well, we must go ahead then on the theory that neither Martha nor her heirs are in the land of the living."

"I do not see any other course open to us."

"No, and if all the advertising did not cause them to appear it is not likely that they will come forward when no effort is made to find them."

"But, as you observed, you know, it is the unexpected that always happens."

"We must take our chances. I will proceed at once to see what this actor and saleslady are like. It is probable that the Brothers of the Invisible Hand will have to take an active part in this matter."

"Yes; by the way, did you ever notice my diamond brooch?" and she called attention to the ornament at her neck.

"Oh, yes, I have seen it; it is very beautiful," and then upon closer inspection, he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Do you see anything strange?"

"Yes, a tiny golden band in among the diamonds."

"That is almost an invisible band, eh?" she laughed.

"Yes, this world is a narrow one after all, for here in America we meet the same people with whom we jostled elbows in England."

A few more words of unimportant conversation and Brakespear took his departure, and he had much to meditate upon as he walked down the avenue.

"Well, I didn't win the widow," he muttered, "but I will play good cards for a million!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE SALESLADY.

RIDLEY'S mammoth store in Grand street, on which is termed the East Side of New York, is one of those grand bazars where almost anything can be bought.

In the old days a great deal of fun used to be popped at the common country store, for, as a wit remarked, in one of them almost anything from a needle to an anchor could be bought, and the modern big store of the metropolis is patterned a good deal after the despised country shop.

With the exception of groceries, almost anything can be purchased in one of the great metropolitan bazars.

And this one of which we write, the cheap store of the great democratic part of the metropolis, compared favorable in size and importance with any of its rivals.

A regiment of girls are employed and it is no exaggeration to say that they wait upon thousands of customers daily.

It was near the close of a long autumn day and the eyes of the tired salesladies were directed anxiously toward the door, impatient to witness the closing of the portals, which would be to them a signal that their day's toil was nearly over.

At six promptly the doors are closed; no more customers are admitted, and as soon as those within the establishment are waited upon, the girls are at liberty to go home, first being obliged to put their counters in order.

The hands upon the clock pointed to the hour of six. The porters took their stations at the doors, and from the lips of the army of salesladies came a great sigh of relief.

As it happened, there was only one customer at the ribbon counter, where two pretty young girls were in attendance.

One of the torments of the storekeeper, the female shopper, who doesn't know what she wants, and pulls over everything within reach in order to enable her to make up her mind.

She departed without purchasing anything, just as the hour of six struck, and the salesladies set to work to put the ribbons in order.

"Oh, Katherine, did you read the *Ladies' Own Journal* this week?" asked one of the girls, a slender blonde, of her companion, a tall, dark, willowy girl, who looked like a Jewess.

"No, I haven't had time yet. I generally read it on Sunday, but Miss Cohen lent me a novel, and as she was in a hurry to get it back, I let the newspaper go, and read that instead."

"Well, that story by The Princess May, is too sweet for anything!" the other cried, in rapture, and as she talked, her busy fingers were working away at the ribbons with wonderful rapidity.

"You know how badly off the Lady Marguerite was in the last paper—how her villainous uncle had her turned out of her cottage—she and her poor, dear mother, because she couldn't pay the rent, and wasn't willing to marry his scamp of a son?"

"Yes, yes, I remember!"

"You recollect how splendidly it ended in the last paper; 'Marry my son, Sir Rupert de Brigadier, or out you go to starve in the streets!'"

"Oh, yes, it was quite interesting," the tall girl said, but it was plain that she did not take the interest in it that her vivacious companion did.

"Well, in the paper this week, just as the horrid sheriff's men are going to throw the poor old widow's furniture into the street, along comes a stranger, a great big, gruff man, with a huge beard, and a complexion as dark as a negro's, and he says, says he, 'Can you tell me, young lady, where Lady Marguerite De Brigadier now resides, the peerless girl who, five years ago, was the beauty and the belle of yonder proud castle?' And it is her other uncle, Katherine, the man whom everybody thought was killed in Egypt, come back with no end of money, and then the story goes on to tell how

he drove the officers out with his cane and the terrible time he had when he got hold of the mean uncle who has done nothing but persecute poor, dear Lady Marguerite ever since her father died, and he managed to cheat her out of her property—and I suppose the next number will end the story, for now she will be able to marry the poor young artist, who is so talented, but hasn't money to help him get ahead. Oh, Katherine, wouldn't it be nice if we had a rich uncle, who would come from some far-off place, with lots of money, so we could have everything we wanted, but I am afraid that there is no such good luck in store for us. I have three or four uncles, but they are all as poor as Job's turkey!" and the girl heaved a deep sigh.

"Well, I have an uncle who went to California some fifteen years ago, and has never been heard of since," the other girl remarked.

"Is that so?" cried the blonde, interested immediately. "Oh, wouldn't it be just too sweet if he were to come back some day with lots of money and make you his heir?"

"I am afraid there is no such good luck in store for me."

"Then there would be no more stuffy old shops for you and having to worry your brains out to wait on fussy old women who want to match a shade which they bought 'only last week,' when they know very well that it was six months ago and not here at all but at some cheap, special sale."

"When mother was alive she was always expected to hear from my aunt, or uncle, some day, for they were great friends, and I believe uncle thought just as much of mother as if he had been her own true brother instead of one only by marriage," the girl observed.

By this time they had completed the arrangement of their counter, so they went for their hats and wraps and having got them, repaired to the street.

As they passed through the door they stopped for a moment to exchange a word with the porter, and as they did so, a rather tall, smoothly-shaven gentleman, dressed in a dark business suit, and who had very much the appearance of a minister, came up.

"My good sir," he said, to the porter, in a smooth, persuasive tone of voice, "can you tell me if a young lady by the name of Katherine Green is employed in this establishment?"

The young girls stared at the stranger, and the porter, very much impressed with the appearance of the gentleman, responded:

"Yes, sir, this is the young lady," and he nodded to the tall dark girl.

The stranger made the mistake of assuming that he meant the vivacious blonde girl, and he looked at her with considerable astonishment.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed. "I never should have known you in the world! How you have changed since you were a child."

"Oh, sir, you have made a mistake!" the blonde declared; she was never at a loss for words. "I am not Miss Green; it is this lady. My name is Mathews."

"Ah, yes, I see!" and the stranger smiled blandly upon the two. "Well, well, you do look something like what I expected to see, but you take after your father much more than after your poor mother," and here the gentleman heaved a deep sigh, and the girls fancied that there was a slight trace of moisture in his eyes.

Miss Mathews was quivering with excitement, for she was sure that the visit of the stranger would be productive of some important result.

She was a hungry reader of all the light, cheap, love literature of the day, and in many of her favorite stories the mysterious strangers who appeared in this unexpected manner always turned out to be somebody of importance.

"Yes, sir, mother was light, while I am dark," Katherine remarked. The blood, too, was throbbing high in her veins, for there was a novelty in this evidently well-to-do stranger accosting her and speaking of her parents which impressed her greatly.

"And she was short, while you are tall, but there you take after your father again," the stranger remarked, and at this point there came a rush of girls from the store so that the three had to make room.

"We are in the way here, I see," the stranger added. "If you have no objections, young ladies, will you walk to the corner, where we will be able to converse in peace, for I have a few questions which I should like to ask you."

Of course the girls were quite willing, for their curiosity had been greatly excited by the gentleman's words.

At the corner they drew out of the human life-current ebbing up and down Grand street, filling the sidewalk so that there was hardly room to walk. Allen street, into which they turned, was deserted compared to the main avenue.

A few yards from the corner the gentleman halted and addressed the girls in his benevolent way.

"Now, my dear young lady, would you have any objections to answering a few questions which I should like to put to you in regard to your family? I think I was acquainted with your father and mother," he said, and the girls fancied that his voice trembled slightly at the

end of the sentence, and again the moisture seemed to gather in his eyes.

Evidently he was aware of this fact, for he attempted to conceal it by remarking that it was very dusty, and with a snow-white handkerchief he wiped his eyes.

"Oh, no, sir; there isn't any reason that I know of why I should not answer you."

"Why, certainly not, Katherine?" Miss Mathews exclaimed, unable to keep quiet. "I am sure Miss Green would be delighted to give you any information in her power."

"I expected it, of course, and I assure you, young ladies, unless I have made some great blunder, Miss Katherine here will have no reason to regret that I took the trouble to hunt her up; and it has been no easy task, I assure you, my dear young friends, for to find a single young girl in the midst of the many thousands who are in this great overgrown city is a wonderfully difficult undertaking."

The girls were getting nervous with excitement; why had the gentleman taken so much trouble?

"Your father's name was William?"

"Yes, sir."

"William Morris Green?"

"Yes, sir."

"And he died when you were about two years old; he was a carpenter and builder, and left your mother a small house in Market street."

"That is correct, sir."

"Your mother was named Katherine, and you are called after her, but your full name is Katherine Martha Green; you were named Martha after your mother's youngest sister, who married a gentleman named George Cauldwell."

It was as much as Miss Mathews could do at this point to refrain from calling out: "Oh, sir, ain't you Mr. Cauldwell?" but she resolutely put her tongue between her teeth and so managed to keep quiet.

"Heaven be praised, my child, there is no mistake about the matter—you are indeed the young lady that I took you to be!" the gentleman exclaimed, clasping his hands together and casting his eyes upward in a very pious way.

"The detective whom I employed to find you assured me that there was no mistake about the matter, and you were the young lady I sought, but I was not sure he could be trusted," the gentleman continued. "I told him to spare no expense to find you, and I did not know but that such an order would be a temptation to him to find some girl whom he might attempt to persuade me was the right one, if he was not able to really find her."

"A detective!" Miss Mathews murmured under her breath, and her eyes grew large with wonder; this, for all the world, was like a chapter taken out of the novels which she devoured so eagerly.

"But it is all right; I am satisfied you are the Katherine Green I seek!" the gentleman exclaimed in a joyful tone. "My dear young lady, prepare yourself for a surprise, which I think will be as pleasant as it is unexpected. I am your uncle, George Cauldwell, just returned from California, after fifteen years' absence!" and then the stranger shook Miss Katherine's hand, and in his joy shook hands with Miss Mathews too, and it was as much as that delighted young lady could do to refrain from singing "Hooray!" at the top of her voice, so rejoiced was she at this strange discovery.

"Well, really, uncle, I had a thought that it might be you when you began to inquire so particularly."

"Yes, yes, no doubt! I thought you would and that is one reason why I questioned you so closely. I wanted to give you time to prepare," Mr. Cauldwell explained. "My dear child, I am as delighted to see you as if you were my own daughter. Your mother, you know, was always a great favorite of mine and it was quite a shock to me, I assure you, when the detective whom I employed to trace your folks out in his report said that your poor mother had been dead for some years." And then, overcome by his emotions, the gentleman had to have recourse to his handkerchief again.

A tear or two appeared in the dark eyes of Katherine, and Miss Mathews had all she could do to keep from "boo-hooing," as she said afterward, right out.

"Well, well, it is the course of nature, Mr. Cauldwell remarked, with a solemn shake of his head. 'All flesh is grass and grass is hay, we are gone to-morrow and here to-day. I too, my dear Katherine, have had my share of trials and tribulations!' And he heaved a deep sigh.

"I don't know as you know the particulars in regard to my family; you were so young when we went to California, but your dear aunt, my beloved wife, Martha, and I were blessed with three children. But heaven giveth and heaven taketh. Your aunt and I are now childless, all alone in the world. True we have prospered in a worldly fashion; we have wealth in abundance, more than we know what to do with, but, oh! how gladly would we give it all to have our dear children back again!" Once more the tears came into the eyes of the speaker, and the girls had to resort to their handkerchiefs out of sympathy.

"There, there, I will not dwell upon the melan-

choly subject!" he declared, brightening up with an effort. "You are found and that is one great comfort. I have purchased a mansion in Sixteenth street and hereafter we will live in the city, and as soon as possible, my dear Katherine you must take up your abode with us. We rely upon you to console us for the loss of our dear ones. There will not be any more trial and privation for you, my child; henceforth a good comfortable home with us will be yours; we depend upon you to be the prop for our declining years. We do not live in any great style you know, my dear child, for both your aunt and myself are plain people, but we have every necessary comfort. That is my carriage yonder."

And the gentleman pointed to a neat one-horse coupe, driven by a coachman in a plain, dark livery which stood by the curbstone about fifty feet up the street.

The girls looked in the direction indicated, and again Miss Mathews's eyes were distended.

"Oh, my, Katherine is going to have a carriage! won't the girls in the store open their eyes when I tell them about it," she murmured under her breath.

"Your dear aunt is so anxious to see you—to clasp you in the arms which have not held you since you were a little child," Mr. Cauldwell continued.

"Oh, I shall be so delighted to see her, Uncle George. It seems almost too good to be true!" Katherine exclaimed. "Here I thought I was almost all alone in the world, and to have you and aunt come—to enjoy my own home again, I shall be so happy that I will not know what to do."

"My poor dear wife will be overjoyed; she is not in the best of health, but under your ministering care I do not doubt that she will rapidly improve," the gentleman declared. "Her injunctions to me were to hurry you on soon as I could."

"Why don't you go right along now?" Miss Mathews cried, eagerly, glad of a chance to take an active part in this exciting affair.

"Yes, yes, the very thing!" Mr. Cauldwell exclaimed. "If I should bring you home with me your poor dear aunt would weep tears of joy I know!"

"You can go just as well as not!" Miss Mathews urged. "I will tell them at the boarding-house where you have gone."

The two girls roomed together.

Katherine was so eager to meet her aunt that it did not take much urging to induce her to consent to go at once, so she got into the coupe with the gentleman, and was driven away, Miss Mathews waving her hand after the carriage in a great state of excitement.

CHAPTER XIII.

HILDA'S DECISION.

In the parlor of the theatrical boarding-house sat the young actor, Mortimer, Louise Amherst and Hilda Serene.

They had just finished dinner, and had repaired to the parlor to enjoy a social chat.

Like the majority of theatrical people they were fond of talking "shop," and for a few minutes they discussed theatrical matters.

"Logadere" had entered upon what promised to be a successful run, and the performers confidently looked forward to a prolonged stay in New York, a circumstance which gave them great pleasure, for the actor's life "upon the road," as traveling from town to town is called, is not a pleasant one.

Finally the conversation turned to the attempt which had been made upon the actor's life.

Ten days had now elapsed since the night of the dress rehearsal and no information had been gained in regard to the matter.

"These detectives are no good!" Miss Amherst exclaimed in her decided way.

"Oh, come, you are jumping to a conclusion too hastily," Mortimer remarked.

"You must give them time," Hilda Serene observed. "Remember that detectives are only men and 'work by wit and not by witchcraft, and wit depends on dilatory time.'"

"Oh, that is all very well, but it seems to me that within a week or ten days the detectives ought to have discovered something about the matter if they were good for anything," Louise replied.

"Well, I don't know about that," Mortimer remarked. "As far as I can see, the case seems to be an extremely difficult one."

"Yes, that is my opinion," Hilda coincided. "Although I am not sure that my ideas about the matter are worth anything."

"Oh, dear! what a modest, retiring creature you are!" the lively young actress exclaimed. "Now I am fully satisfied that I am not one-half as capable of expressing an opinion about the matter as you are, and yet I do not hesitate to boldly declare what my ideas are about the affair."

"There is a very old adage, you know, which says that unwise people rush in where angels fear to tread," Mortimer observed, with a quizzical glance at Louise.

Miss Amherst made a face at him.

"You are a horrid man to say that, although you did have the grace to soften it down a

little!" she declared. "The original reads: 'fools rush in where angels fear to tread.'"

"Oh, well, I did not want to break your heart entirely, you know," Mortimer replied, laughing.

"That is more than you or any other man can do!" the young actress retorted.

"But, jesting aside, Miss Serene, I think you are as fully qualified to give an opinion on the subject as any one I know of," Mortimer asserted. "You seem to have a marvelous faculty for getting at the points in the matter. I went to Police Headquarters with the manager right after the affair happened and there was introduced to the Superintendent of Police and a couple of the detectives."

"The superintendent struck me as being a remarkably able man, and the way he got at the points in the case strongly reminded me of you, but I cannot say that the detectives made a favorable impression upon me."

"Men were put upon the case at once?" Hilda questioned.

"Yes, immediately. Gilmore is a personal friend of the police chief and so he took extra pains about the matter," the young actor answered.

"And no discoveries have been made?" Miss Serene asked.

"None at all. I was at Police Headquarters this morning with the manager. He takes a deal of interest in the matter, and I went over with him to see how the detectives were getting along," Mortimer explained.

"And they report no progress, eh?" Hilda questioned.

"That was the report," the young actor answered. "Gilmore was disappointed, and when he said so to the chief, the superintendent replied, he had not expected that the men would be able to do anything with the case when he put them on it, for he considered it to be about as difficult a one as any he had ever encountered during the whole of his career."

"Yes, that is the way it looks to me," Hilda remarked, thoughtfully. "Although, of course, I am not capable of passing an expert opinion upon the matter, but it seems to me that there are no clues at all to go upon, for the man who made the attempt upon your life has disappeared, leaving no more trace behind him than if he had never existed, and you are not able to afford any information, for you have no enemies, and know of no reason why any one should attack you."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Mortimer in astonishment. "I believe you were cut out for a detective, for you have repeated the words of the superintendent of police almost exactly."

Hilda smiled.

"Well, I do not know," she said. "It seems to me that it is all very plain and simple, and anybody ought to be able to arrive at the conclusions. But I admit that I would like to be a detective, for I think the life would just suit me, although I am not so sure that I am suited to the life."

"Oh, yes, you are!" Miss Amherst declared immediately, and with great emphasis. "I feel quite certain about the matter, and if I were you I most certainly would try my hand at it. Think what a feather it would be in your cap if you succeeded when the detectives failed."

"Oh, yes, but it is altogether unlikely that I would be able to succeed," Hilda replied with a doubtful shake of the head. "To my thinking it is by accident alone that any clue to the man can be gained; luck not skill must win the victory."

"I think, Miss Serene, that you must be a natural born detective for you have argued this matter out exactly the same as did the superintendent of police," Mortimer remarked. "He declared that owing to the absence of clues the ablest detective would be baffled and that only through some great piece of luck could the bloodhounds get upon the track. Oh, you ought to be a detective!"

"I must confess that I think I should like the life," Hilda admitted. "And I presume too that there are plenty of female detectives."

"Of course!" Miss Amherst exclaimed. "I have read of their wonderful exploits a dozen times."

"The superintendent, in speaking about the part that you took in the matter, said that he thought you had the making of a good detective in you, for above all things that the successful sleuth-hound must possess is dauntless courage, and the plucky way in which you grappled with the man plainly showed that you had that to an eminent degree."

"The superintendent was pleased to be complimentary," Hilda remarked, with a faint blush. "And I suppose I ought to call upon him and tender my thanks for his kind words, and at the same time I can tell him that one of these days, when I am out of an engagement and want something to do, I would like to have him give me a chance at the detective business."

The young actress spoke in a jesting tone and neither one of the others had any idea that she was in earnest and meant what she said, but she did, though.

"All right!" Mortimer exclaimed. "I would if I were you. I feel sure that you could make

a success, and when you get ready to go just let me know and I will take great pleasure in taking you up and introducing you to the chief."

"Yes, yes, you will make a splendid success in the detective line, I am sure!" Miss Amherst declared.

"Well, I am not at all sure of that," Hilda replied. "But I think that it is very likely that I will try it some day. I do not think I will ever make my fortune upon the stage. I have advanced to a certain point and do not seem able to improve any; I am not content. Of course, I make a good, comfortable living and do not have to work hard. Nine women out of ten would be perfectly satisfied, I suppose, but I am not."

Mortimer gallantly asserted that Miss Hilda was not doing herself justice, but in his heart he knew that the girl was right.

She could never hope to rise to any eminence upon the stage. She was a good, reliable actress, who could be depended upon to get through her roles in a satisfactory manner, but it was certain that she would never astonish the world with any burst of genius.

After a few minutes more spent in conversation the party separated.

Hilda went to her room and dressed herself for the street.

She had made up her mind to call upon the superintendent of police and see what he had to say in regard to her undertaking to play the part of a detective.

The girl certainly possessed another great qualification for a detective besides her dauntless courage, and that was her ability to keep her own counsel.

During the conversation she had decided to call upon the chief of police that very afternoon, but she did not breathe a word of her intention to her companions.

She had learned where the Police Headquarters were situated, and after leaving the boarding-house proceeded straight to Mulberry street, where without any trouble she found the white-fronted building where the all-powerful chief of the great metropolitan police force reigns.

CHAPTER XIV.

GOOD ADVICE.

WITH that calm confidence which was so characteristic of the girl the young actress marched up the steps of the Police Headquarters and inquired of an officer, who was standing in the doorway, if she could see the superintendent with as much assurance as though it was a common every-day occurrence for her to call upon the august head of the police force.

The policeman happened to be one of the obliging kind and so took pains to bring her to the office of the chief instead of leaving her to find her way there alone.

The superintendent sat at his desk writing, a resolute, determined-looking man with a shrewd, penetrating look, and a pair of eyes that seemed to have the power of looking clear into one's soul.

He recognized the young actress at a glance.

"Good-afternoon, Miss Serene, I am glad to have the pleasure of meeting you. Pray take a chair," and he waved his hand to one at the right of the desk. "I have seen you on the stage at Niblo's during the past week and am pleased to have an opportunity of making your acquaintance in private."

"You are very kind," Miss Serene remarked in her matter-of-fact way, taking a seat as she spoke. "I have taken the liberty of calling upon you because I want your advice upon a certain subject."

"I shall be delighted to be of service to you," the superintendent replied, intently studying the face of the girl as he spoke.

During the course of his professional career he had come in contact with all sorts of women, but here was one who seemed to be entirely different from any one whom he had ever encountered.

Hilda was well aware that she was under inspection but it did not worry her in the least.

"Mr. Mortimer informs me that the detectives who have been employed on his case have not succeeded in gaining any clue to his assailant."

"That is correct, and it is my opinion that they will not be able to do anything unless favored by some fortunate accident. The case is an extremely difficult one, for there is absolutely nothing for the detectives to go upon," the superintendent remarked.

"Yes, it seems so to me, although, as I am without experience in such matters, I am not well qualified to express an opinion," Hilda observed.

"Such is certainly the case, and from the first I have been doubtful. The difficult part of the case lies in the fact that there seems to be no reason for the attack—no motive at all, and that is what bothers my men. If Mr. Mortimer had an enemy who desired his death, or if he were so situated that some one would profit by his taking off, then a clue could be secured, but, as it is, the matter is shrouded in the deepest kind of a mystery. That there was some powerful motive which urged the man on to the commission of the crime I have not a doubt, but what

the motive was puzzles me. If Mr. Mortimer was able to give me some information in regard to that, we could go ahead, but now, we are working in the dark, and, as I said before, unless some lucky accident favors us there is no chance of our being able to accomplish anything."

"Yes, I can understand that," Hilda observed, thoughtfully. "I talked the matter over with Mr. Mortimer this afternoon—we boarded at the same house—and that was the conclusion to which I came to take a great interest in the case and the thought has come to me that I would like to try and see what I could do in the detective line."

A look of surprise appeared on the face of the superintendent.

"I suppose the idea will appear to you to be foolish in the extreme," Hilda added, hastily. "But I feel so strong an inclination to try, that I thought I would come to you and see what you thought about the matter."

"Well, Miss Serene, I will admit that I am a little surprised that you should entertain such an idea, it being entirely unexpected, but I can see no reason why you should not try that line of business if your inclinations lead that way," the chief remarked. "From what I know of you I think you must certainly possess many qualifications necessary to a successful detective. You are wonderfully strong for a woman, and understand how to use your strength; you are self-possessed and your stage training will be very useful if it is necessary for you to assume a disguise at any time. Then, too, from the way in which you went to work to ascertain how it was that the stranger came to take the place of the regular stage hand, I should argue that you had natural talent for pursuing an investigation."

"I certainly have a strong inclination for the life, if that counts for anything."

"It most certainly does. A man or woman generally succeed best in the occupation for which they have a natural love."

"What are the forms necessary to be gone through before I can begin my investigations?" Hilda asked.

The superintendent smiled and shook his head. "My dear Miss Serene, there are no forms whatever to be gone through. This is a free country and if any one thinks that they have a mission to become a detective, there is nothing to prevent them from trying their hand at the business."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"But to become a regular detective is quite another thing," the superintendent explained.

"Regular detectives are appointed and receive a salary, just the same as a police officer or any other official. Then there are irregular detectives, police spies really, to give them the name by which they are known in Europe, men and women whose names are not on the pay-rolls of the Police Department, who are only paid when they are employed, and then comes the lowest grade of all, who are technically termed 'stool-pigeons.' These are usually men and women who have committed some minor crime which has brought them in contact with the police, and they 'sneak' to use the slang word for betraying their comrades, in order to get off with a light punishment. This part is kept secret though, for if it became known that they had been favored by the police their associates would no longer trust them and their usefulness would be gone."

"Yes, I understand."

"These people, frequenters of the haunts of the criminals, often bring us valuable information and they are paid in accordance."

"They must be useful, working thus secretly and in the dark."

"Yes, oftentimes they bring us word of some crime planned but not committed, and being thus warned in advance we are able to catch the fellows right in the act," the superintendent continued. "This is rather a rare occurrence, though. As a rule, they are made useful after a crime has been committed. If it is a big bank robbery we send word to the stool-pigeons who are intimate with the crooks who pursue that particular branch of business—evil-doers, you know, are divided into classes, just the same as honest men."

Hilda nodded; being a great reader she was well aware of this fact.

"We tell these parties to keep their eyes open and ascertain what men are holding secret confabs together—whether any of them appear to be particularly flash with money, or if any noted bank cracksmen are missing from their usual haunts. It is often the custom of the big crooks after a great haul is made to leave town until the hue and cry has in a measure subsided, so by the aid of the information received from the stool-pigeons we are able to secure our men."

"And did you employ these spies in the Mortimer matter?"

"Oh, yes, but gained no information whatever," the superintendent replied. "You see, as I said before, the trouble is that we had absolutely nothing to go on but the description of the man who fired the shot, and as there are probably ten thousand men in the city, and plenty of crooks and toughs among them, who would

answer to that description, it was not of much service to us."

"If I undertake to try what I can do in the detective line I would come in under the head of police spies."

"Yes, and if you should succeed in doing anything with this affair, which has baffled my best men, you can rest assured I will find plenty of employment for you in the future."

"Well, I will try and see what I can do," Hilda remarked, rising as she spoke. "I shall keep the matter quiet though, then if I fail no one will be the wiser."

"That is a good idea; a good detective keeps his own counsel. If you need assistance a line to me will bring it at any time."

"Thanks," responded the girl.

The superintendent bowed and she departed.

CHAPTER XV.

AN UNEXPECTED EVENT.

From the Police Headquarters, Hilda proceeded to Houston street.

Her mind being busy in thought she did not notice where she was going until she came to the corner, and then, looking around her, she saw that she had come in the wrong direction.

"What does it matter?" she murmured. "I have the time all to myself until supper and I might as well wander around the streets as to go home. Like a knight of old, when he set out in quest of adventures, he threw the reins upon the neck of his horse and allowed the animal to go whither he listeth, so I will proceed at random, for it does not signify where I go, and I might as well spend the time in walking in the open air as to go back to my stuffy little bedroom in the boarding-house."

Acting on this idea, Hilda turned and walked along Houston street until she came to the Bowery.

She proceeded up this popular thoroughfare for a few blocks, amusing herself by looking in the shop windows, and then crossing the street, came down on the other side, and when she reached Second street, the inspiration came to her to revisit the scene where she had begun her researches into the Mortimer mystery.

She walked slowly along on the opposite side of the street to the one on which stood the barracks-like tenement-house where the scene-shifter resided, and as she passed the building, Hilda gazed at it with her keen eyes as though she fancied she could tear the secret of the dark mystery from the senseless walls.

Then a sudden idea came to her.

"Ah, there is a point which neither the superintendent nor any of the detectives seem to have seen!" she exclaimed. "If they did, the superintendent did not mention it, and he would not have been likely to neglect doing so, if it had occurred to any of them."

"The man who fired the shot was undoubtedly a professional criminal—a crook—for no novice in crime would have the nerve to attempt such a feat, and then, too, an amateur would not have had a gang of confederates in waiting to help him to escape in case he should be captured."

"Now this man was one used to the stage, or else he would not have been acceptable to the master-carpenter. If he had not understood his business as a scene-shifter or stage hand—and no green hand would have been able to deceive a man like Sherwood, who is a veteran stage-carpenter, one of the best in the country—he would have been discharged immediately. So, when the superintendent put his stool-pigeons on the case, he ought to have given them instructions to look for the crook who had been connected with a theater—the man who had once been a stage hand. I think this point did not occur to the superintendent, or else he would have spoken of it."

Hilda had been walking along as she mused, not taking any particular notice of where she was going and she turned to the right at random and went down the street.

After going a few blocks she caught sight of the name of the thoroughfare.

She was on Allen street.

There was a crowd collected in the middle of the next block and Hilda hurried forward to see what was the matter.

A large wagon had broken down; it was heavily loaded, and as the driver attempted to turn, a wheel had come off just as the vehicle was turned squarely around across the street, and as there were empty wagons on both sides of the way, the thoroughfare was completely blocked.

A little crowd had quickly gathered; it does not take much to get a crowd together in a big city, where there are plenty of people with nothing to do but to stand and gaze; Hilda stood on the edge of the curb, below the broken-down wagon and watched the men attempting to raise the wagon so as to replace the wheel.

As she stood and gazed upon the scene, a couple drove up and came to a halt within five feet of where the young actress stood.

Carelessly, Hilda glanced at the driver of the coupe, a medium-sized, smooth-faced fellow, dressed in a neat, dark livery.

The moment the girl's eyes fell upon the face of the driver she gave a start of surprise, and in

spite of the efforts of the driver to look indifferent, as his eyes met Hilda's, a scowl gathered upon his face.

The driver in livery was the stage hand who had called himself Thomas Finn.

Hilda was quick to act; the moment she recognized the man she made a dash for him.

The flowing garments of a woman are not well fitted for athletic exercises, but despite her skirts, she sprung upon the shaft of the coupe, and almost before the man comprehended what she was about, had him by the throat.

The bystanders roared aloud in excitement.

In a twinkling, before any one could move a finger to interfere in the matter, Hilda dragged the man from the box of the coupe to the street.

The fellow struggled with all his might, but muscular as he was, could not escape from the firm grip of the young actress.

"Let go of me, or I will do you a mischief!" he cried.

"Stop your resistance, or it will be the worse for you," Hilda replied.

The man attempted to strike her in the face; with a quick movement of the head she dodged the blow, and then, in an extremely dextrous manner, gave the fellow a trip with her foot and laid him on his back with as little trouble as though he had been a child.

Again the crowd roared—this time with delight.

Hilda knelt with her knee on the man's chest, and she had her muscular right hand twisted in his collar in such a way as to nearly strangle him.

Out of the coupe popped a middle-aged man; he had opened the door just in time to witness the "going to grass" of the driver, and the head of a young girl appeared in the carriage doorway after the man alighted.

As the reader has probably suspected, this was the coupe belonging to Mr. George Cauldwell, the Californian uncle of Miss Katherine Throckmorton, the saleslady, and the passage of the two up-town had been thus strangely interrupted.

"Hallo, hallo!" cried Mr. Cauldwell, evidently in a great state of excitement; "what on earth does this mean? Is the woman crazy? Help me to secure her, some of you! Where are the police?"

"This man is an escaped criminal, and I arrest him in the name of the law!" Hilda cried, to the intense amazement of the bystanders.

"This woman is a lunatic," Mr. Cauldwell, declared. "She does not know what she is saying!"

"Oh, yes, I do!" Hilda exclaimed. "This man is my prisoner, and I am going to hold on to him until a policeman arrives to take him into custody."

"This is utterly ridiculous," the old gentleman retorted. "You have made some absurd mistake. This man is my coachman; he has been with me a number of years, and I know that he is a thoroughly honest fellow, and you, young woman, will have to answer to the law for this outrage!"

"Don't you worry about that!" Hilda retorted. "I know my business, and if you only know yours half as well you will be fortunate."

Apparently taking heart from the interference of his employer, the fellow began to struggle, and endeavor to get out from under the pressure of the firm knee upon his chest, a movement that the strong-armed Hilda speedily put a stop to by pressing her knuckles in his throat in such a manner as to cut off his supply of wind.

"Hold on, hold on! what are you doing?" cried Mr. Cauldwell, in alarm. "You will kill the man!"

He had noticed that the driver was getting black in the face from the choking which Hilda was administering in so skillful a manner.

"Let him stop struggling, then, and submit quietly to the arrest!" Hilda answered. "He is my prisoner, and I do not intend that he shall escape!"

"What is the matter? I've me in there, will ye!" cried a hoarse voice, whose accents showed undoubtedly that the owner was a native of the Emerald Isle.

And then, pushing his way through the crowd, came a burly, red-whiskered, red-faced policeman.

"Ah, now we will have this matter speedily settled!" Mr. Cauldwell cried, in a tone which betrayed great satisfaction.

"I am glad you have come, officer!" he continued. "I can see that you are a man of discernment, and I know you will soon fix this thing up."

"Bedad, an' I will—you kin take yer oath on that!" the policeman cried, flourishing his club in the faces of the crowd so as to force them back.

"My coachman has been assaulted and dragged from his box by this extraordinary young woman, whom I fancy to be crazy from the way she acts, and I call upon you, officer, to arrest her!"

"I'll be afther doing that same in the wag of a goat's tail!" the "intelligent" policeman declared.

And then, to the astonishment of the young actress, the policeman seized her roughly by the

shoulder with his left hand, while he swung his club in a menacing way over her head.

"Come out o' that—I've got of the man, or I'll be afther poundin' a little sinse inter yer crazy skull!" he declared.

This sudden turn of affairs took Hilda by surprise, for even when the old gentleman made the accusation, she did not think the policeman would be so stupid as to believe it until he had examined into the matter, but she was not at all disposed to tamely submit.

"It is a falsehood!" she declared. "I am no more crazy than he is! It is all a lie to secure the escape of this man who is a criminal whom I have just arrested!"

"Wow, wow!" cried the officer, in derision, "is it a policeman that ye are, that ye do be talkin' of arresting? Come along wid me now, an' don't be afther makin' a Judy of yourself!"

And the officer attempted to drag her to her feet, but as she still retained her hold on the throat of the now senseless man, he was not able to do so until she let go her grip.

There was a peculiar glint of fire in Hilda's clear eyes as she rose to her feet, pulled up by the rough hand of the Irishman, one of those dull brutes, who, by some of those strange chances due to the miserable politicians who are the curses of the metropolis, had been promoted from carrying the hod to wielding the locust club of office.

The gray of the eyes had hardened into green, and any one well acquainted with the girl could have told that there was a storm brewing.

"I don't mind being arrested," Hilda remarked, "only there isn't any need of your being so rough about the matter. I am perfectly willing to go with you, but I demand that this man whom I have captured shall go, too!"

"She is crazy, officer! Don't pay any attention to her!" Cauldwell exclaimed. "Take her away! I will appear against her. She has nearly killed my man, but she cannot pull the wool over your eyes with any of her crazy talk!"

"No, sur, not by a jugful!" the policeman cried. "Come along out of that, wid ye!" and he gave Hilda a violent pull, while he waved his club in the faces of the bystanders so as to open a passage.

By this time the temper of the crowd had got decidedly ugly, and frowning faces were to be seen on all sides.

The bystanders, almost to a man, sided with the young actress.

"And are you not going to arrest this man?" Hilda cried.

"Come along wid ye, an' be afther k'aping yer mouth shut!" the policeman cried, angrily.

"I tell you that he is a criminal for whom the detectives have been in search!"

"Howld yer whist, or I'll give ye a crack over the nose, which will be afther spiling yer face for ye!" the officer replied, and as he finished the sentence, he raised his club as if he really meant to do as he threatened.

Now Hilda had often read of the brutal ways of some of the policemen, who disgrace the uniform they wear, and she had no notion of being abused by this red-headed brute, so, as he raised his club as if to strike, with a sudden whirl she broke his grasp upon her shoulder, caught his wrist with her right hand, gave it a sudden twist which made him drop his club as though the article had suddenly become red-hot; this movement made the Irishman howl with pain; then, with wonderful quickness, she dealt the man a blow in the stomach which doubled the officer like a jackknife.

And now came the crowd's opportunity.

Wrought up to a great pitch of excitement by the girl's attack, they seized upon the unlucky Irishman.

One man banged his helmet down over his eyes, a dozen fists pounded him all at once, knees and feet aided his progress through the crowd, and when he got on the outside of the throng he was about as badly a used policeman as the streets of the metropolis had ever seen.

The man was nothing but a coward at heart for all of his bravado, one of those utterly unfit men who sometimes manage to smuggle themselves into responsible positions.

Up the street he galloped, yelling at the top of his lungs, producing an immense excitement.

At the corner he ran into the arms of his sergeant, who, at the head of the reserve squad, was hastening to the scene.

Word had been brought to the station by some frightened citizen that a small riot was brewing on Allen street, and the sergeant had hastily set out with all the men he could muster to quell the disturbance.

CHAPTER XVI.

A DISCOVERY.

"Oh, sergeant, dear, it is murdered I am entirely!" the policeman cried, as he recognized the officer.

"Well, you look as if you had been roughly handled," the officer remarked, with a sarcastic grin.

The sergeant had an extremely poor opinion of the Irishman, who was the cause of more trouble than all the rest of the men in his command put together.

"There's a devil of a woman down the street, wid the biggest crowd of blaggards that ye iver layed yer two eyes on!" the Irishman declared.

"A woman!" exclaimed the sergeant in surprise.

"Yis, sur! Och, be the powers, it's a howly terror she is!"

"I will have to attend to her case. Forward!" commanded the sergeant.

On went the squad, the Irishman falling in behind.

The crowd scattered when they saw the policemen approaching on the double-quick, swinging their clubs, so when the squad reached the scene, there was a clear space around the spot where Hilda stood by the prostrate man.

The coachman recovered consciousness just as the police arrived, and rose to a sitting posture.

The sergeant was amazed when he looked upon Hilda, for he expected to see some virago, and the young actress was also surprised, for in the officer she recognized the man who had directed her how to find the Superintendent of Police that very afternoon.

Although she was not aware of the fact, the sergeant knew who she was, for he was a great theater-goer and had attended the performances at Niblo's; she was soon enlightened in regard to this, though, for the moment the sergeant arrived on the scene he addressed her by name.

"What is the trouble, Miss Serene?" he exclaimed.

The Irish policeman stared in astonishment at hearing the sergeant address the young actress like an old acquaintance.

"I have arrested this man," she replied, her mind considerably relieved by the fact that the officer knew who she was. "He is the one who fired the shot at Mr. Mortimer, but when this stupid Irishman came along he insisted upon making me a prisoner, and was going to allow this man to depart; I resisted, the crowd took my part, and between us all the policeman got rather roughly handled."

"You are always putting your foot in it, Patsey, it seems," the sergeant remarked, to the Irishman's great astonishment.

"Sure, didn't the gentleman in the coach say that she was afther murderin' his man, an' axed me to arrest her?" the policeman exclaimed.

"Where is he?" asked the sergeant, glancing around.

The rest followed his example, but Mr. George Cauldwell had disappeared.

He had apparently taken advantage of the confusion to quietly depart.

By this time the driver was on his feet, and he seemed to be greatly astonished at the disappearance of his employer.

"How is this, my man?" the sergeant asked. "What has become of your boss?"

"Blamed if I know!" the fellow growled.

"I s'pose he thought there was going to be a general fight and took a sneak."

"It is very strange that he should not stay to face the music," the sergeant remarked.

"Well, I s'pose he got frightened," the driver replied. "He is an old gentleman, and it ain't likely that he is used to a racket of this kind."

"You are sure in regard to this man, Miss Serene?" the sergeant asked. Being well acquainted with all the particulars of the Mortimer case, he had no need to ask any questions when Hilda announced that he was the man who fired the shot.

"Yes, no doubt about the matter at all!" the young actress replied, in the most positive manner.

"I will send him right to Headquarters, then," the officer announced. "You get into the coach and I will put an officer on the box to drive."

Hilda went to the carriage and was confronted by the anxious face of the young saleslady, who was both amazed and alarmed at these strange proceedings.

Miss Serene saw that the girl was terrified, and so spoke words of encouragement.

"Do not be afraid, my dear," she said, as she got into the coach, "no danger will come to you."

There was that in the innocent face of the girl which satisfied the acute Hilda that she knew nothing of the driver's guilt, even if the eldierly gentleman did.

The actress had formed an extremely unfavorable impression of the coachman's boss. There was something about his personal appearance that Hilda did not like, and then the promptness with which he had come to the driver's assistance, and his endeavors to procure her arrest, allowing the coachman to go free, did not seem to her to be just the way an honest man would act.

His sudden disappearance, too, when the officers appeared on the scene was against him.

The shrewd-witted Hilda had jumped to a conclusion in regard to the matter.

The man was a crook, and he got out of the

way when the policemen came because he was afraid that some of them would recognize him.

"Where is my uncle?" Katherine asked, anxiously, after Hilda entered the coach and closed the door.

"You mean the old gentleman?"

"Yes."

"He is your uncle, then?"

"Yes."

"He has gone away, evidently, for he is not around."

"I suppose he got frightened—he is not used to the city."

"Ah, he is a stranger, then?" asked Hilda, anxious to find out all she could about the man.

"Yes, he has just returned from California, where he has resided for many years; I have not seen him since I was a mere child," and then Katherine, encouraged by deftly-put questions from Hilda, told the story of her meeting with her long-absent uncle.

And while she was telling the tale the impression came to Hilda that the girl had been deceived for some purpose and that the man was not what he pretended.

"I am sorry that I had to interrupt you in your journey after fortune," Hilda observed. "But in the driver I recognized a scamp for whom the doors of the jail are yawning. Possibly you read in the newspapers of the attempt which was made about ten days ago to assassinate Mr. Mortimer, one of the actors at Niblo's Garden?"

"Oh, yes, I read all about it!" Katherine exclaimed, with unusual animation. "And I took a great interest in the matter, for I have an idea that Mr. Mortimer is my cousin."

This unexpected announcement caused Hilda to utter a cry of astonishment.

"I am not quite sure of it, you know, but I believe he is," Katherine added. "For my Aunt Agatha, my mother's oldest sister, married a Mortimer, and her son—her only child—was named James. I don't know much about my aunt and her family, for they lived out West, and I never saw my aunt and my Cousin James but once—when I was little—still, I feel pretty sure that this Mr. Mortimer is my cousin, for I went to a matinee at the theater with a couple of girls from the store, and Mr. Mortimer looks just like Aunt Aggie, as my mother always taught me to call her."

Deep thoughts were in Hilda's brain as the girl prattled on.

Had she been lucky enough to stumble upon a clew to the dark mystery which surrounded the attack on Mortimer?

Had she, by arresting the driver of the coupé, failed in another blow aimed at a member of the family to which the young actress belonged?

She thought that it was likely, for now that she was in possession of Katherine's story, she was more and more convinced that the man who called himself George Cauldwell was a fraud, and that he was no more the uncle of the saleslady than she was.

Hilda was careful, though, not to mention her suspicions to the girl, for she saw that there was no doubt in her mind in regard to the matter; she had perfect faith that the man was what he represented himself to be.

But although Hilda was satisfied that she had spoiled a carefully-planned scheme, yet she was not able to guess why it had been formed.

That the girl was being lured away by this man who had appeared to her in the guise of her uncle, she was convinced, but the motive for the deed was a mystery, equally as deep as the Mortimer one, and she had a suspicion that the two were intimately connected.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE EXAMINATION.

By the time that Katherine had finished her explanation, the coach had arrived at Police Headquarters.

The sergeant had ridden on the box with the officer, whom he had selected to drive, leaving to his men the task of bringing the prisoner, and, warned by the experience which the Niblo's Garden policeman had had with the fellow, a pair of handcuffs had been snapped upon his wrists, so he had no chance to give leg-bail this time.

The sergeant conducted Miss Serene into the presence of the superintendent of police, and great was the amazement of that official as he listened to the story the sergeant told.

"Well, Miss Serene, there is an old saying that it is better to be born lucky than rich, and, most certainly, this little affair would seem to indicate that you were born under a lucky star, since you have been able to accomplish in a single afternoon a task which all the detectives in the city could not do in ten days," the superintendent exclaimed.

"You know you said it was a question of luck," Hilda replied, with a smile.

"The man is a stranger to you?" the superintendent asked of the sergeant.

"Yes; I do not know him, although I think I am acquainted with as many crooks as any man in the town," the officer replied.

"It is strange that the owner of the coupé should get out of the way in such a mysterious manner," the superintendent observed.

Hilda made a sign, which the acute chief interpreted to mean that she had something to say about the matter, but did not want to speak in presence of the sergeant.

"Yes, it is odd," the officer observed.

"You had better go down and receive the prisoner," the chief said. "When he comes, send him up to me, and at the same time notify all the detectives to come in and take a look at the fellow; some one of them may be able to identify him."

The sergeant saluted and retired.

"I fancy that you have something to say about this matter," the chief remarked, after the door closed behind the officer, "and I commend your caution in not wishing to speak before any one. In such matters the fewer witnesses the better. This is a very uncertain world, and sometimes the people whom we believe to be most trustworthy, turn out to be exactly the contrary."

"I have always been used to keeping my own counsel, so it is nothing new to me to be cautious," Hilda replied. And then she proceeded to relate to the chief the story that Katherine Throckmorton had told, and in conclusion related her suspicions about the matter.

The superintendent was amazed; he had met people with acute minds before, but none that impressed him as strongly as this girl.

"Upon my word, Miss Serene, you did not make any mistake when you imagined that you could do something in the detective line!" he declared. "I do not want you to think that I am flattering you, but I will say that this bit of work of yours is as clever a thing in the detective line as has come under my notice for a long time."

"You think, then, that my suspicions are correct?" Hilda asked.

"Yes, I do not think there is a doubt about it. I feel sure that you have hit upon the truth, and you have obtained a clue to the mystery which has baffled the best detectives in New York—and when I say that, I think it is almost the same as saying the best detectives in the world, for I don't believe either the French or English service is as good as ours, despite the reputation which they have."

"It was not through any superior skill on my part, though, that this result was brought about; it was pure accident."

The superintendent laughed.

"It does not do to tell tales out of school, you know, still I don't mind saying to you that in about nine cases out of ten the most successful detectives owe their triumphs to the chance of accident; where the skill comes in is the ability to profit by the accident, and the forethought to see just how much can be made out of the affair."

"Yes, I see."

"In this case you have displayed a skill which would be a credit to the oldest detective on the force."

"Ah, now you are flattering me, I am sure!" Hilda exclaimed.

"Oh, no, it is the truth—nothing more. I am satisfied that the conclusions to which you have come in this matter are correct, and that you were able to reach them, with so little to go upon, satisfies me that you have the instincts of a true detective, and, with a little practice, will take a high rank."

"Well, I hope so, for I must confess that I like the life, and I do not care for the stage."

"You left the young lady in the coach?"

"Yes, I told her to wait until I came for her, and then I would take her home. I thought that it was possible that you might want to hear her story from her own lips."

"Oh, no, I am satisfied that you have got all the points," the superintendent replied. "In case we cannot get anything out of the man, the game will be to use this girl as a decoy. If your supposition is right in regard to the girl being lured away, it is probable that the game will be tried again, and I will have her closely shadowed—without her knowledge, of course, for it would not be safe to allow her to know what was going on."

"Yes, it would not be wise, for she would be apt by some blunder to spoil the scheme."

"But what puzzles me about the matter is the motive!" the superintendent exclaimed, his brows compressed in thought. "That there is some deep motive at the bottom of the affair is certain, but I cannot for the life of me imagine what it is; if we have patience, though, by diligently following up the clue which we now possess, we may discover it in time."

At this point the conversation was interrupted by the entrance of the sergeant with the prisoner, followed by a number of detectives.

"What is your name?" asked the superintendent in his abrupt, decisive way when the man was arraigned before him.

"John Mack," the man answered, sulkily.

"That is not the name you gave when you were at Niblo's Garden," the superintendent remarked.

"I never was at Niblo's Garden in my life," the driver declared.

"How is that, Miss Serene?" the chief asked.

"He is not telling the truth," the actress answered. "He was a stage hand at Niblo's Garden and he called himself Thomas Finn."

"What have you got to say to that?" the superintendent queried, bending his keen eyes sharply on the man.

"The lady has made a mistake!" he declared, endeavoring to assume an innocent air. "I don't doubt that she thinks she knows me, but it isn't so. I am not the man she takes me to be. I am a coachman and was never behind the scenes of a theater in my life."

"There is no mistake about the matter—he is the man!" Hilda declared, firmly.

"Take a look and see if any of you recognize him," the chief said to the detectives.

The man-hunters came up one by one and carefully surveyed the prisoner; he bore the scrutiny without flinching.

The detectives shook their heads; no one was able to identify the fellow.

When the inspection was finished the superintendent beckoned to one of the detectives.

The officer received a whispered communication from the chief and then departed.

This circumstance seemed to trouble the prisoner, to judge from the look which appeared in his eyes.

"How long have you been in this country?" asked the chief, abruptly.

"I—I have always lived here!" the man declared, after a moment's hesitation.

"Here in New York?" questioned the superintendent, carelessly.

The man scented a trap immediately.

"No, I haven't lived in New York right along," he answered, and there came a look in his eyes like the one which comes into the orbs of a hunted animal when the pursuers are close upon the track.

"Ah, haven't lived in New York right along, eh?" said the superintendent in a bland and careless manner, as though he attached no particular importance to the statement.

"No, sir," and despite the man's efforts to appear calm and unconcerned there was an anxious look upon his face.

"Where have you lived?"

"Well, I have been traveling around a good deal," the man replied, slowly.

"Traveling, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"In what part of the country?"

"Out West."

"Did you do pretty well out there?" And the superintendent put the question as if he really took an interest in the matter.

"Well, no, I managed to live, and that was about all," the fellow replied, evidently puzzled, by the interest that the other manifested.

"You made quite a number of friends, I suppose?"

"Can't say that I did."

"Acquaintances then; you surely became acquainted with the people for whom you worked?"

"I didn't have steady jobs; I just picked up a day's work here and there."

"Ah, yes, I see; whereabouts in the West—at what town did you stop the longest?"

"Chicago," the man replied, after hesitating a moment.

"Who did you work for in Chicago?"

"Say! I don't think that you have any right to put me through any such examination as this!" the driver exclaimed, indignantly. "I am not accused of having committed any crime in Chicago!"

"Oh, no; no such accusation is brought against you," the superintendent replied in the pleasantest possible manner. "I was only asking you to give an account of yourself for your own benefit. There is a pretty serious charge brought against you here in New York, and if you were able to say, I worked for such and such men in Chicago, and all of them will testify that I was an honest and upright fellow it would help you materially. Still, you are not obliged to give an account of yourself if you do not want to, but I tell you, my man, you are making a mistake in not doing so, for it immediately gives rise to the natural suspicion that you have something to conceal."

"Well, that ain't so!" the driver exclaimed, sulkily.

"An honest man ought not to wish to keep back anything connected with his career; this is good advice I am giving you, but if you do not choose to take it, it is your own affair."

"I think I am the best judge," the other replied with a defiant shake of the head.

"You say your name is John Mack?"

"Yes."

"Your business?"

"Coachman."

"By whom are you employed now?"

"By Mr. George Cauldwell."

"Was that the middle-aged man who was in the coach when you were arrested?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very strange that he disappeared before the officers came up," the superintendent commented. "Have you any idea why he did not wait to see the end of the affair?"

"I s'pose he got frightened when he saw that there was going to be a row; he was a kind of nervous old chap and easily scared."

"Humph! it certainly is extremely strange," the chief remarked.

"Where does this Mr. Cauldwell live?"

"I don't know," the man answered to the surprise of all the hearers.

"How is that?" exclaimed the superintendent. Do you mean to say that you don't know where your boss lives?"

"Yes, sir, that is what I said. He lives up-town somewhere, but I don't know the street. He told me where it was—Thirty something, but this trouble has knocked the thing clear out of my head."

"This is a most extraordinary statement!" the superintendent exclaimed. "How long have you been driving for this Mr. Cauldwell?"

"I only commenced about an hour ago. I just got in this morning from Chicago and I met Mr. Cauldwell on the train. He sat in the same seat with me and so we got to talking, and when he found that I was coming to New York to look for work he said he would give me a job."

"Quite a fortunate meeting for you," the superintendent remarked, dryly.

"Yes, sir, and after we got into the city, he took me to the stable where he kept his carriage and I got this livery coat and hat there."

"Had it all ready for you, eh?" the chief exclaimed.

"I had been got for his other man who didn't suit," the driver explained. "I put on the togs and drove the carriage until I got into this trouble."

CHAPTER XVIII.

SEEKING A CLEW.

THE chief could not help smiling when the man finished his story, and there was also a broad grin of incredulity upon the faces of all the officers.

"Oh, come now, you don't expect us to believe this yarn, do you?" exclaimed the superintendent.

"Well, it is the truth!" the fellow replied, doggedly.

"It is almost as lame and disjointed a tale as I ever listened to!" the official declared. "And it is evident to me that neither you nor your Mr. Cauldwell had any idea that you would fall into the hands of justice or you would have hatched a much better yarn than this."

"Mebbe it don't look like jest right but it is the truth for all that," the man protested, stoutly.

"Whereabouts was the stable to which this Mr. Cauldwell took you?"

"You are too much for me, capt'n," the man responded, scratching his head, slowly.

"Do you mean to say that you do not know?" demanded the superintendent, fixing his keen eyes in a stern gaze on the face of the other.

"That is jest what I mean to say," the man responded, stoutly.

"Well, upon my word, your story gets worse and worse, more and more incredible!" the chief declared.

"It was on the west side of town somewhere, but I never noticed exactly where. I went right along with the gentleman, and after I got on the box he told me to drive down town until I came to Grand street, then turn east, but what street I came down is more than I know, for I never took any notice."

"Well, it does not matter much," the superintendent remarked. "When Mr. Cauldwell comes after his carriage we can ascertain all the particulars from him."

The chief made the observation in a careless way as though he did not attach any particular importance to the matter, but he had his eyes fixed in a watchful gaze upon the face of the accused; he noticed the shade which came over it, and the look he construed to mean that the fellow felt certain that no Mr. Cauldwell would put in an appearance to champion his cause.

"You stick to this story, then, that you have told?" the superintendent continued.

"It is the truth, and of course I stick to it," the other replied, sulkily.

At this point the detective who had been dispatched by the superintendent entered the room, and with him was the master stage-carpenter of Niblo's Garden Theater, William Sherwood.

"This is one of the gentlemen you sent for," said the officer, presenting Sherwood to the chief.

"What is your name, sir?" asked the superintendent, while the prisoner's face grew dark, although he did his best to appear unconcerned.

"William Sherwood."

"Your occupation?"

"Master stage-carpenter of Niblo's Garden."

"Look around, Mr. Sherwood, and see if there is anybody here that you know," said the police official.

Sherwood had been brought forward in such a way that his back was to the driver, but when he turned, in compliance with the chief's request, he looked the man directly in the face.

The master-carpenter started, although he was in a measure prepared for some such thing.

"Yes, I know that man there, Thomas Finn, he is the stage-hand who fired the shot at Mr. Mortimer," he said, pointing to the prisoner.

"Tain't so!" the fellow growled. "I never saw you before!"

"Oh, yes, you did!" Sherwood exclaimed, positively. "I have not made any mistake. You are the man, sure enough! I know you, although you have made some changes in your personal appearance."

"Bring in the other," commanded the superintendent.

The old back-door-tender of Niblo's Garden then was introduced, and he promptly identified the prisoner as being the man, Thomas Finn, who had come in place of the regular stage-hand.

The old man was very positive about the matter, for when the fellow had come to the back door, bearing the letter to the master-carpenter, the guardian of the portal would not allow him to pass, but detained him there until Sherwood came.

"It seems to me that they are making out a pretty strong case against you," the superintendent observed.

"It ain't the first time that a mistake has been made of this kind," the driver argued. "I s'pose I look a good deal like this man, Finn, but I ain't him, by a jugful!"

"My man, bravado will not do you any good this time. If you are wise you will own up and make a clean breast of it. Reveal who it was that put you up to this job, for it is my idea that you are not the principal in this matter, and you will stand a chance to get off with a light punishment."

"Oh, I see your game!" the driver exclaimed. "You are trying to scare me, but the thing will not work. I am not the man who did the job, and when I come to be tried I will be able to prove it, too, for all that you think you have got me in such a tight place."

"Take him down below," the superintendent commanded, apparently not inclined to waste any more words on the fellow.

The driver was removed, the rest also departed, leaving Miss Serene alone with the chief.

"Well, what do you think of the affair?" the official asked.

"The man is an old hand, and one evidently accustomed to police courts," the girl answered.

"Why do you think so?"

"Because he did not betray any confusion, and was constantly on his guard against being entrapped in any way."

"You are a shrewd observer," the superintendent remarked, with an approving nod. "And, to my thinking, the conclusion you have reached is a correct one. The fellow is an old hand, and is perfectly familiar with courts. It is my belief that he has strong backing, too, or thinks he has, or else he would not put on so bold a front."

"The scheme was stupidly planned," Hilda observed. "But of course the parties who arranged it did not provide for the emergency of an arrest. That was something that they did not calculate upon."

"But it is the unexpected that always happens, you know," the superintendent remarked.

"Yes, but in this case it apparently looked to the men who planned the affair as if there was not one chance out of a thousand of anything happening to interfere with the working of the scheme, and if it had not been for the lucky accident which brought me in the path of the carriage there is no doubt that the plan would have worked to perfection."

"You have done nobly, Miss Serene, and you can consider yourself enrolled among the police spies from this day forth," the superintendent declared.

"I am glad to have been so fortunate, but I am not at all satisfied, although I have succeeded in capturing my man," the young actress remarked. "The mystery of the attack on Mr. Mortimer is as great as ever, and, in fact, this attempt to abduct the girl, who is his cousin—for I am satisfied that that was just the game which my interference prevented—complicates matters."

"The abduction of the girl is fully as great a mystery as the attack upon Mr. Mortimer, and I am satisfied that the two are connected in some way—that one motive is at the bottom of both attempts."

"Yes, I think you are right there, and it is my notion that if we push this Mack, or Finn, whichever he is, we may be able to get a clew," the superintendent observed.

Hilda shook her head.

"You do not agree with me, eh?" and the superintendent laughed. "Well, I see that you are going to be honest, and are not going to flatter me by pretending to believe that I am right when you have doubts in regard to the matter."

"It is presumptuous, I know, for a novice like myself to doubt the wisdom of your ideas," Hilda observed. "But you have treated me so well that you have given me courage to speak."

"That is right!" the superintendent exclaimed. "That is exactly the way I wanted it to be. I wish you to speak freely. Old stagers like myself are apt to get in ruts, and fresh young wits like yours often hit upon valuable ideas, so go ahead!"

"Although none of your detectives recognized this man, yet I do not think there is a doubt that he is an old criminal."

"That is correct, I believe."

"Probably from the West, or possibly from across the water, although he does not seem to be an Englishman."

"Correct again."

"He is in a bad position, yet he does not appear to be troubled about it; it is not because the man is ignorant, and does not comprehend the danger to which he is exposed."

"Oh, no; he is an old hand!" the superintendent exclaimed.

"It follows, then, it seems to me, that he must have powerful friends, and he is confident that they will be able to get him out of this hole into which he has tumbled."

"It certainly looks like it."

"Is it not probable, then, that this man is one of a powerful and well-organized band of men who are leagued together to prey upon society, and who are bound by oath to assist one another if any of them are so unfortunate as to be caught in the meshes of the law? I know that this sounds like a page of a romance," Hilda added, with a smile, "but truth is stranger than fiction, you know."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that, and all these tales of secret leagues have 'ruth for a foundation,' the superintendent remarked. "I should not be surprised if you are right in your surmise, and in regard to the existence of these criminal leagues, there is no question that they have existed, and may exist now. It is the nature of these fellows to band themselves together so as to carry out schemes which, singly, they could never hope to accomplish."

"When you come to look closely into this matter, although there is no doubt about the guilt of the man, and little chance for him to escape conviction, yet if he is defended by a smart lawyer—and if one of the best in the city does not appear for him I shall be surprised—the chances seem to me to be great that he will escape with a light punishment, for, as no particular harm was done to Mr. Mortimer, and it cannot be shown that the fellow had any reason to wish to kill him, the chances are great that in an average jury there may be some dull-heads stupid enough to believe that it really was an accident, and that the man did not intend to do harm."

"Your reasoning is good," the superintendent declared, with an approving nod.

"From these circumstances I have come to the conclusion that you will not get any information from this prisoner, and as to Mr. George Cauldwell, you will not be troubled by any visit from him. He got out of the way when the officers came up, for he is not a stranger like the driver, and knew he would be recognized. Some one will come to claim the carriage—some innocent party, apparently, who rented it to this Cauldwell, but, to my thinking, the owner of the carriage will be apt to be one of the members of the band, and it will pay to keep an eye upon him."

"Correct again, my dear Miss Serene," exclaimed the chief, in admiration. "Ah, you did not make any mistake when you took the notion into your head that you had talent which would shine in the detective line."

"From the prisoner nothing can be gained, but we may be able to discover who backs him, yet keeps concealed. A watch must be placed upon Mr. Mortimer, another one upon this girl, for it is safe to conclude that since the first two blows have failed, others will be attempted."

The superintendent nodded in token that he agreed with this declaration.

"A watch must be also put upon the man who comes to claim the carriage, and through some one of these shadows we ought to be able to get a clew to the parties in the background."

"Yes, the chance seems good. And now in regard to yourself: if there is a gang at the back of this man it is undoubtedly a powerful one and the odds are great that when they discover—as they probably have by this time through this Cauldwell—that to you they are indebted for the second failure of their plans, it is likely that they will attempt to be revenged upon you, so you must keep a good lookout."

"I have thought of that," the girl replied.

"To kill the sleuth-hound who follows faithfully on the track is the best way in the world to stop the pursuit."

"Yes, and that is probably the way these scoundrels will reason, so you must keep a bright lookout, and be prepared to resist an attack."

"I am prepared," Hilda replied, quietly, and then, from a secret pocket, just below the waist of her dress, within easy reach of her right hand, she produced a revolver, and the rapidity with which she drew the weapon was wonderful.

"Well, well, the man who gets 'the drop' on you, as they say in the West, will have to be remarkably quick!" the superintendent exclaimed.

"All my early life was spent in the West, and I have been familiar with weapons from childhood," Hilda explained. "You will see that this is no toy, such as women usually have, but

a serviceable weapon, carrying a bullet big enough to stop a man; then it is a double-acting revolver, so that a shot can be fired without the hammer having to be raised."

"Upon my word, Miss Serene, from the way you handle the weapon I can well believe that you are perfectly familiar with the use of it."

"Oh, yes, I am, and I am a dead shot too."

"And you would not hesitate to use the weapon if you were attacked?"

"Certainly not!" the young actress exclaimed, decidedly. "Although I am a woman, yet in that respect I am just as bloodthirsty as a man, and would as quickly defend myself if attacked, and too would show as little mercy to my foes as a red Indian on the war-path."

"But this is not my only means of defense," she continued. And as she spoke she returned the revolver to its place and from another secret pocket, upon the left side of her dress, drew forth an eight-inch bowie-knife, which she flourished with her left hand, like one perfectly familiar with the use of the weapon.

"This is even a surer weapon than the revolver," Hilda remarked, "for it never misses fire, and at close quarters is certain to do deadly execution."

"Well, after this display I don't think I shall lay awake nights speculating whether you will be able to take care of yourself or not," the superintendent remarked, with a laugh.

"You need not worry about me," Hilda replied, replacing her knife in its hiding-place. "I am as capable of taking care of myself as any detective on the force."

"That I can readily believe, and I am glad that you are so well prepared, for I shall be surprised if the gang do not attempt to do you some damage."

"Well, if they attempt it—and I think that it is likely they will—maybe I can get a clew to the men," Hilda responded, with a coolness which surprised the official.

He surveyed her for a moment with knitted brows and then burst into a laugh.

"By all odds you are the coolest hand that I have encountered for a long, long time!" he exclaimed. "And, unless I am greatly mistaken, you will make your mark in the detective line."

"I certainly will try," Hilda replied. "And now I will send this Miss Throckmorton to her home, and I shall not say anything to lead her to suppose that there is anything wrong about this pretended uncle of hers, for through the girl we may be able to get on the track of the secret band."

"That is wise."

"I live in Great Jones street, at Mrs. Clifton's theatrical boarding-house, if you wish to send any message to me."

"Yes, I know the house, and as it is important that no one should suspect that there is any understanding between us, you must not come to Headquarters again. If anything important occurs, you can send a message, and I will meet you. Let me see!" and the superintendent tapped his brow with his finger for a moment in thought. "We must arrange some place where we can meet without danger of any one knowing anything about the matter, for to render you useful as a police spy it is imperative that no one should suspect that you are one."

"How would the theater do?" Hilda asked. "You and the manager are on good terms, I believe?"

"Oh, yes, we are old friends."

"I can enter by the back-door, the stage entrance, and you can come through the front of the house, by arranging with the manager so to do. Of course, you will have to, in a measure, take him into your confidence. By arranging the matter in this way we can meet and no one will be the wiser."

"The idea is a capital one!" the superintendent declared. "I will see the manager and make all the necessary arrangements."

Then Hilda departed.

In the street she spoke to Katherine and said she would show her the way to her home, as the police were going to take the coupe, but after the saleslady found out where she was she declared that it was not necessary, as she could go home alone without any trouble.

Hilda walked with her as far as the Bowery, though, and during the brief interval made such an impression upon Katherine that the orphan girl was ready to declare she was the dearest and sweetest woman that she had ever seen, and the two parted the best of friends, Hilda having promised to call upon Katherine as soon as she could find time.

It was the game of the female spy to secure the confidence of the girl so as to be warned by her if the supposed uncle again made his appearance, as Hilda felt sure would be the case.

"Though the first attempt failed, they will reason that a second may be more successful," the young actress remarked.

CHAPTER XIX.

DANDY BEN.

As the superintendent of police expected, it was not long before a claimant for the coupe appeared, and, as it happened, the man was one well-known to the superintendent.

He was a hackman called Benjamin Keyser, but better known to his associates and the police as Dandy Ben.

He was what is usually termed a "night-hawk;" that is, he did far more trade by night than by day.

About midnight, and the small hours of the morning, he haunted the neighborhood of the popular up-town saloons, on the lookout for fast men about town, who wanted to be driven home after a night's revelry, and when he had the luck to get hold of a man considerably the worse for liquor, one who had money in his pocket, and valuable jewelry on his person, it was but seldom that the passenger reached his domicile with as much money and jewelry as he had started with.

This habit of Dandy Ben of "taking toll" from his drunken passengers had brought him in contact with the police, and although he had always been lucky enough to squeeze out without getting "sent up," yet it had given him a "black eye" with the detectives, and he had been warned that if he did not change his game he would be caught so "dead to rights" some day that he would have to take a trip up the river to Sing Sing's famous prison.

"Halloa! what do you want?" the superintendent asked as Dandy Ben was ushered into the office by one of the detectives.

The police chief put the question as though he was surprised by the appearance of the hackman, but the moment he saw him he suspected that he came in reference to the coupe.

"I come about my carriage down in the street," the man said, ducking his head with a clumsy attempt at a bow.

"Your carriage?"

"Yes, that 'ere coupe is my rig."

"Haven't you made some mistake?"

"Nary time!" the man declared, emphatically. "Why, I would know that old roan mare of mine anywhere!"

"The horse and carriage belongs to a Mr. George Cauldwell," the superintendent asserted.

"No, sir-ee! they are mine. That is the name of the cove I hired 'em to."

"Oh, you hired the rig to this Mr. Cauldwell?"

"Yes, sir, that is the how of it. I was a-standing on Union Square—that is where I hang out during the day, you know—when this 'ere Mr. Cauldwell come along with a cove whom he said he had engaged to drive for him, and he was anxious to see what he could do as a driver. His own horse was lame, he said, and he would like to hire my rig for a couple of hours."

"Ah, yes, I see; and you were willing, of course?"

"Cert! for he put up a tenner like a gentleman, and ten-dollar bills ain't so plenty that I am throwing chances away for to pick 'em up; and so as to make the thing look all right I lent the duffer my coat and hat. These 'ere are his'n that I have got on."

"Wasn't it rather risky lending your rig and your clothes to a perfect stranger?" the superintendent queried. "Your coat and hat were worth more than ten dollars."

"Oh, well, I wasn't afeard!" the hackman declared. "I am too old a rounder to be picked up for a sucker. I knew that the man was on the square—I could see it in his looks, 'sides, he give me his card with his house on it, all straight as a string!"

"Have you got that card with you?" the police chief asked, carelessly.

"Yes, in course," and the man put his hand in his vest pocket in the most confident way.

Then the expression upon his face suddenly changed.

"No, blame it all, I hain't got it!" he cried. "I forgot that I went home and changed my clothes. It is in my other vest."

"Ah, yes! You left it hanging upon the piano, I suppose?" the chief remarked blandly.

"Oh, come now, you needn't think that I am giving you any guff!" the fellow declared, assuming an injured expression. "I didn't leave it hanging up on no piano, 'cos I ain't got no sich thing in my roost, but I have got the card, all the same!"

"Well, now, I am really sorry, for I take an interest in this Mr. Cauldwell, and I wanted to discover where I could find him."

"I'll fetch the card to you arter I go home, though, mind, I don't know that it is all straight," the hackman explained. "But I reckoned it was, though. The old duffer looked to be all right, and so I went for his ten dollars. But if there's any plant, I am not in it, and don't know anything 'bout it!"

"How did you know that your rig was here?"

"One of the boys see'd it, and hunted me up for to tell me."

"Ah, yes, I see!"

"I s'pose I kin have it all right?"

"Do you know a man named John Mack?" asked the police chief, abruptly.

"No."

"Thomas Finn?"

"I know a Billy Finn, who works in Center Market."

"That isn't the man. Well, you can have the rig by proving property."

"I reckon I will not have to go far to do that. Some of the detectives must know the business."

"I will see about it."

The superintendent sent a messenger, and he soon returned with the information that a couple of the officers had identified the rig as being the property of Dandy Ben.

"How about the feller w'ot has got my coat and hat?" the man asked.

"You are anxious to know where he is, eh?"

"W'ot do I keer 'bout him?" Dandy Ben exclaimed, with an air of deep disgust. "He kin go to blazes for all of me, but I would like to git my coat and hat."

"Take off the things, and I will send them to him."

The hackman complied.

In a few minutes the messenger returned with the livery coat and hat.

The hackman put them on.

"Now don't forget when you come across Mr. Cauldwell's card to send it to me," the superintendent said, "for I would like to have a few minutes' conversation with that gentleman."

"Of course I will send it to you!" the hackman declared. "But, mind now, I don't say that it is all square, 'cos all I know of the man is what I have told you, but if he ain't all straight, then he is the biggest kind of a confidence man, for he fooled me, and I reckon I am no slouch!"

With this declaration the man departed.

"Send the inspector to me?" the superintendent commanded, and then he fell to writing, busily.

When the inspector entered—a broad-shouldered, muscular man with a face that plainly showed that the owner possessed both brains and determination—the superintendent handed him the memorandum which he had just drawn up.

"Have these parties, whose names are here inscribed, shadowed continually; not that they are suspected of meditating any evil-doing, but as a measure of precaution to keep them from being harmed. If my suspicions are correct all three of them, Mortimer, the actor, at Niblo's Garden, Miss Serene, actress, at the same house, and Katherine Throckmorton, saleslady at Ridley's, are in danger of being assailed by a desperate gang. Put your best men on the case!"

The inspector replied that it should have his immediate attention and departed.

"Now I must have patience until the next move is made," the superintendent mused.

CHAPTER XX.

IN THE COURT.

AN hour or two after his arrest Finn was turned over by the detectives from Headquarters to the regular police authorities, by them duly placed in the Tombs and his case brought before the presiding magistrate.

This was the first notice that the indefatigable reporters got of the affair, for the superintendent of police had been careful that none of them should know anything about the examination at Headquarters.

The chief's idea was to keep the part that Hilda had played a profound secret.

He was well aware that the gentlemen of the "press" would have been delighted to have got hold of so choice a news item, and if they had, they most assuredly would have written up the part that the young actress had played until they had made her out a heroine second only to Joan of Arc.

This is in consequence of the modern editor's injunction to the modern reporter, "Get news, sensational news if you can, and if you cannot, get what news you can, write it up and make it sensational."

Newspaper readers love spicy articles, and if the news of the day is not spicy it must be written up to appear so.

The superintendent understood this, and as he wanted to keep Hilda in the background he took care that the newspaper men should get the idea that Finn had been captured by one of the ward detectives.

To allow the world at large to know that Hilda Serene was really a heroine would be to interfere with her usefulness as a police spy.

The next morning Finn was brought up for examination, and, to the surprise of every one except the superintendent of police and the female police spy, Counselor Have of the firm of Have and Humpit, the most renowned criminal lawyers in New York, appeared for the prisoner.

The examination was a brief one.

The prisoner protested that a mistake had been made and that he was not the man; there were too many witnesses, however, who swore in the most positive manner that he was the party who fired the shot to allow this statement to have any weight with the judge and he was bound over for trial.

Then the question of bail came up; the district attorney's men protested strongly against the prisoner being admitted to bail, claiming that he had tried to commit a cold-blooded murder, and although, thanks to the interference of Miss Serene no particular damage had been done, yet, to all intents and purposes, he was just

as guilty as though he had killed the man at whom he had fired.

Then the ponderous and able Counselor Have "got his work in" in the scientific manner peculiar to him.

It was the duty of the court, he argued, to consider what had been done, not what might could, or would have happened. He was willing to admit that a shot had been fired, and that the shot came from a revolver in the hands of his client—it was a standing joke among the counselor's brother lawyers that he was always ready to "admit" a fact when the evidence in regard to it was so strong that no one could have any possible doubt in regard to the matter—but that the shot had been fired with the intent to harm Mr. Mortimer, the idea was preposterous. It was an accident, as he was fully prepared to show at the proper time, and in such a convincing manner that no one could have any doubt in regard to the case.

"There was no motive for the crime—none had been shown, or even alleged; his client was a stranger to Mortimer and it was absolutely ridiculous to suppose that a man would attempt to kill another in cold blood without knowing anything about him, and he submitted that, under the circumstances, to refuse to admit the prisoner to a reasonable bail was an injustice of which he could not, "believe a judge who knows the law so well as Your Honor," and he made one of the elaborate bows for which he was famous to the court—"could possibly be guilty."

It was an able speech, and there was hardly a man in the court who did not think the lawyer would carry his point.

The representative of the district attorney's office felt that the lawyer's arguments were extremely strong ones, and the counselor that spoke in answer made but a lame speech in reply.

The judge reflected over the matter a moment and then said he thought that under the circumstances the prisoner was entitled to be bailed and he would put the figure at five thousand dollars.

According to the rule this would require the man who gave bail to justify for double the amount, or ten thousand dollars.

Counselor Have made a melo-dramatic motion of despair.

"As well might you have sentenced the man to jail for life as required such a bail as that!" he declared.

The judge was firm though, he would not reduce the figure, and the prisoner was returned to the custody of the warden of the Tombs.

At the close of the trial as Counselor Have turned to depart, a note was put in his hand.

"MY DEAR HAVE:—

"Can you give me about twenty minutes of your valuable time? I am in a carriage on Leonard street opposite your office."

And the note had the bold signature of the superintendent of police.

The lawyer smiled.

He and the superintendent were old friends, although, as a rule, in his professional life he was always fighting the superintendent and his men tooth and nail.

Seldom did the counselor appear in court except as the defender of accused men, and many a criminal he had succeeded in rescuing from the clutches of the law.

The superintendent and his police arrested and did their best to convict them when they brought before the bar of justice, and the lawyer exerted all his skill to get the accused out of trouble.

But this was all a matter of business and in private, the best of feeling existed between the two.

The lawyer placed the note in his capacious pocketbook—he was too careful to throw away any paper which bore upon it such a weighty signature, then he repaired to Leonard street, the avenue which bounded the Tombs, the City Prison, on the south.

A plain close carriage was there, driven by an ordinary-looking coachman, not in livery, and there wasn't anything about either vehicle or driver to attract attention.

The superintendent sat on the rear seat, leaning back well out of sight, and when the lawyer came up he opened the door for him.

The moment the counselor was in the carriage and the door closed, the driver, who had evidently had his orders, started his horses and away they went.

Straight to Broadway the carriage proceeded, turned into that great thoroughfare and became one of the endless procession of vehicles hastening up-town.

As soon as the lawyer was fairly in his seat and the carriage started the superintendent spoke.

"I wanted to have a quiet little talk with you, Have, and as there are reasons why I cannot go to your office, nor have you come to mine I hit upon the idea of holding a confab with you in a carriage. It is perfectly private here and we can speak freely without danger of being overheard."

"Oh, yes, no doubt about that," the lawyer remarked. "You have planned this affair with your usual skill, my dear fellow, and even in a little matter like this you display the ability

which has made you a bright and shining light for all men's eyes to gaze upon."

It came perfectly natural to the counselor to use flowery and rather extravagant language, and this fact deceived the auditors who listened to him in the court-room, for oftentimes they wondered how it was possible for him to prepare his speeches when, apparently, he was called upon to go into a case with hardly time to familiarize himself with the facts of the matter.

But Counselor Have was one of those rare geniuses gifted with the art of oratory, and it was no more trouble for him to get up and make an elaborate speech than it was to eat his dinner.

As far as speaking went he was always prepared, and could not possibly be taken at a disadvantage.

CHAPTER XXI.

AN EXCHANGE OF CONFIDENCE.

"THE matter is not a particularly important one," the superintendent announced. "And I have gone into it more to satisfy my curiosity than for any benefit that I may be able to derive from it, and, in fact, it is my idea that you will make more out of the affair than I will."

"Ah, yea, of course," and the lawyer smiled, blandly. "In this uncertain, fleeting world of ours, we generous mortals are always fixing things so that our neighbor may profit more than ourselves."

The superintendent laughed.

"You are incredulous, eh?"

"Well, I do not doubt that you think you are correct in your statement; but if it proves to be so, I shall be very much surprised."

"You will see; it is about the man Finn that I wish to speak."

"Yes, yes."

"You are his counsel, and I must congratulate you on the way you worked for him today."

"You were in the court?"

"I was, and the way you handled the case was my admiration."

"Taffy," responded the lawyer, softly, closing one eye and winking with the other.

"Oh, no, it is honest!" the superintendent declared. "You succeeded in having the man admitted to bail, and, under the circumstances, I consider it a decided victory."

"Perhaps it was, but as the matter stood the judge could not very well decide otherwise, for between us, in strict confidence, you know, the case is a weak one; still, although technically I won a victory, yet it is likely to be a barren one, for a man of the class of this fellow stands about as much chance of escaping from the Tombs as he does of getting anybody to put up the sum of five thousand dollars for his bail."

"Oh, no, you are wrong there; he will get the bail all right," the superintendent replied in a confident tone.

"Do you think so?" the lawyer exclaimed, rather surprised by this positive statement.

"Yes, I do not think there is a doubt of it; so you see your victory will be fruitful in results after all."

"Well, it may be possible that some one will be fool enough to go five thousand dollars on this fellow, but I shall not believe it until I see the ducats put up!" Counselor Have declared.

"Now I am going to put a delicate question to you, Have," the superintendent said, abruptly. "I don't know as you will care to answer it, but if you feel that you can I am sure that in the end you will profit more by the affair than I will."

"Go ahead! I will do the best I can for you."

"In the first place let me assure you that I will not take any unfair advantage of anything that you may say; the information I shall regard as strictly confidential, and I will not make any use of it without your consent."

"That is certainly fair enough, and as I said before, go ahead!"

"How is it that you came to be retained by this man Finn as his lawyer—are you at liberty to relate the particulars?"

The counselor reflected over the matter a few minutes before he replied, and then he said:

"Well, under ordinary circumstances, the relations between counselor and client should be considered strictly private, but in this matter I don't mind straining a point to oblige you, particularly as I am not able to see that it will damage the man in the least."

"Under the circumstances then I do not see any reason why you should not speak."

"How I came into the case is simple in the extreme. This morning an aged female called upon me, said she was the aunt of this Thomas Finn, related how he had been sent to the Tombs, the charge against him, and begged that I would undertake the defense."

"In that delicate manner, characteristic of a gentleman about my size when dealing with the female sex, even when, as in this case, they are old, ugly, and otherwise disagreeable, I informed the woman that I thought she had made a mistake in coming to me—that my fees were high and she would do much better to seek some

cheap lawyer who would be glad to take the case and could afford to do it on reasonable terms."

"But the female was obdurate; she said, not in express terms, but to the effect, that she knew good lawyers came high, but she must have 'em, and then with a business alacrity, which is rare among women, I am sorry to say, she pulled out fifty dollars and planted them down upon the table."

"Would that do for a beginning?" she asked. "She was 'only a poor woman,' but she was not going to see her sister's son in difficulty without straining every nerve to get him out."

"Very commendable on her part, I must say!" the superintendent declared, an odd look in his eyes and a peculiar smile playing around his mouth.

"Oho, you think there is some shenanigan about the matter, eh?"

"Never mind what I think until you get through with your story," the other replied.

"All right. Well, I expressed myself just as you did just now. I told her that the fifty dollars would do for a retaining fee, and I would take the case."

"She called down all sorts of blessings on my head, after the usual style of these elderly females of low degree, and said she could get together fifty dollars more, and would that be enough to see her nephew through? As I happened to be well posted in regard to the case and knew it would not be a difficult one, I told her I thought it would be enough, unless the matter turned out to be a much more complex one than I imagined."

"Of course a hundred was not what I ought to get, but I judged that that was the limit of the woman's pile, and, you know, I am a reasonable man and not a hog, so I was willing to take the hundred."

"Then, too, there was another point, which as a professional man you will understand, to reveal to you one of 'the secrets of my prison house,' I knew the case was of a sensational character, one calculated to attract general attention, and for the sake of the advertising it gives me I can often afford to take such cases even when I know that there is mighty little money in them."

"Of course, I can understand that," the superintendent remarked. "The free advertising that you get in the newspapers is just as good to you as so much cash, for it increases your reputation and helps to attract clients who are able to pay you good, fat fees."

"Exactly; that is the whole matter in a nutshell. Well, that is how I came to take the case."

"I see; and now, Have, honestly, what do you think of the matter? This is in strict confidence, mind, and I pledge you my word I will not take any advantage of any information that you may give me!" the superintendent declared.

"I say, old fellow, what the deuce are you driving at?" the lawyer exclaimed, puzzled by the interest manifested by the other. "What do you care about the matter anyway? Why do you bother your head about this common, every-day sort of rascal?"

"A mere whim, possibly," replied the police chief, smiling.

"Oh, no, I know better than that!" Counselor Have declared. "You are not the kind of man to take such whims into your head. There is something in the background, and although I think I can see as far into a millstone as the next man, yet, I will be hanged if I can guess the drift of this matter!"

"Go ahead, and after you get through I will explain."

"All right. Well, honestly, I don't think the man will be convicted, although there is not the shadow of a doubt that he *did* fire the shot, and that reminds me of a funny circumstance which goes to show how stupid some men are when they get into a hole."

The superintendent nodded.

"When I called upon the fellow in the Tombs, after taking the case, to talk over the matter with him, the egregious ass tried to persuade me that his best defense was the old, worn-out *alibi* game. He was not the man who fired the shot—not Thomas Finn, the stage-hand, at all, but merely another fellow who looked like him."

"It is odd that nine out of every ten of these common scoundrels when they get in trouble, rely upon an *alibi* to pull them through. But how did you succeed in convincing him that the scheme wouldn't work?"

"Well, as it happens, I am an intimate friend of the manager of Niblo's Garden Theater; I was one of the invited guests on the night of the dress-rehearsal, sat in front of the house, saw the whole thing from beginning to end, and promptly told this ass that his *alibi* business was perfectly ridiculous, for I, myself, could swear that he was the man, and when twenty or thirty witnesses could be produced to swear that he was the fellow who fired the shot, the marshaling forth of a hundred who didn't see him perform the deed, would not be of any avail."

"That was a knock-down argument!" the superintendent observed. "What did he say then?"

"Well, he was struck all in a heap, and seemed to be a little touched in the upper story; he talked vaguely about there being a conspiracy to ruin him, and a lot of other stuff, and I had hard work to get any sense out of him. The aunt said he was a heavy drinker, and she was sure his head was affected at times, and, putting this and that together, I came to the conclusion that a big spree was at the bottom of this pistol-firing business."

"Ah, that is the way you solve the mystery, eh?"

"Well, I don't see any other reasonable explanation," the lawyer replied. "The man is a stranger to Mortimer, and there is no earthly reason why he should want to kill him. As it happens, I am thoroughly posted in regard to the affair, for the manager of the theater told me all the particulars that I did not know."

"Now men, you know, seldom commit murder without a motive; true, you might say that this man had been hired by some foe of the actor, who was hungry for revenge, but did not dare to undertake the job himself, but Mortimer upsets that theory by declaring that there isn't a soul on earth, that he knows of, who bears him ill-will enough to attempt his life."

"Yes, I see now how you intend to conduct the defense," the superintendent remarked, thoughtfully. "Your theory, in the absence of a motive, will be accident, or that the fellow was recovering from a big spree and did not know what he was doing."

"Yes, those are the points. Of course, I ought not to give this away, and I would not to any man but yourself!" the lawyer declared.

The police chief laughed.

"Have, you are about as smart as they make them!" he declared.

"Well, I flatter myself that I was not born yesterday," the lawyer remarked, complacently.

The superintendent laid back in the carriage, and indulged in a hearty laugh.

"Wherefore this merriment?" the other asked, puzzled.

"It is a rich joke!"

"Maybe it is, but I must confess that I don't see it."

"You have got fifty dollars out of this Finn affair, and you expect to get fifty more?"

"Yes, and little enough it is, too, in all conscience," the lawyer grumbled.

"You are right, for you might as well have had a hundred or two in the beginning as the fifty, which, by the way, I am willing to bet you a good round sum is all that you will ever get."

"Eh? What makes you think so?" Counselor Have queried, decidedly annoyed.

"Because, my dear fellow, you have been played for a flat, and I must admit that the job has been performed in an extremely scientific manner, or else it never would have succeeded with an old hand like yourself, and, really, I am not sorry that this trick has been played upon you, for your skill and eloquence have often been successful in releasing some rascals whom I would much prefer to have safely caged in Sing Sing."

The lawyer shook his head.

"Assertion, my dear superintendent, is not proof," he declared. "Demonstrate to me that this thing is as you declare!"

"First let me assume the role of a prophet," the police chief replied. "The fifty dollars, which you have already collared, is all that you will get out of this case, and, as I have said, you could have had two hundred if you had made the demand, and refused to take the case for less; this worthy aunt, who is so anxious about her sister's son, would have found the money, if you had insisted upon having it; and you need not worry your head in regard to what line of defense you will adopt, for the case will never come to trial; you have already won all the victory that the man craves, by getting him admitted to bail. A bondsman will come forward, who will qualify for ten thousand dollars, the man will be released, and that is the end of the affair."

"Oh, come, now!" the lawyer exclaimed. "You are putting it a little too strongly. You don't mean to say that this common scoundrel will forfeit five thousand dollars rather than stand trial, for I assume, of course, that you will take care that the security is good for the money and will not permit any straw bondsmen to be rung in?"

"Yes, but the same old game will be worked in this case that has been tried a dozen times before in our New York courts," the superintendent replied. "The bondsman will be good when he signs the bond—will have property representing the amount called for, but after the fellow is released, and gets safe out of harm's way, what is to prevent the bondsman from disposing of his property, so that the city will not be able to collect anything from him when he is called upon to produce the man or pay the bail?"

"Yes, yes, that game has been worked successfully a number of times, and no stop will be put to it until we have a law making the amount of the bond a lien on the property, the same as a mortgage."

"That will come in time, I suppose, but it

does not exist now, and by means of this loophole this scoundrel will escape."

"Yes, but hold on!" the lawyer cried. "How comes it that a common, vulgar rascal like this man can be able to work the trick in such a superior manner?"

"Because he has powerful friends; he is but a tool, the principals are in the background; but, my dear fellow, you are 'done,' all the same."

"Upon my word, I believe you are right! and if things turn out according to your prediction, I will know that you are correct; still, under the circumstances, it is no wonder that I was fooled. A smarter man than I pretend to be would surely have been caught in such a carefully planned trap; but I must rise to remark that this beats all the games that I have ever heard of."

"Yes, the players are skillful ones, and they do not mean to lose a point if they can help it; I trust though that in the long run I can succeed in showing these men in the background a trick or two that will be apt to astonish them." And there was a world of grim determination in the manner of the superintendent of police as he spoke.

"Well, if you are right—and I suppose it is dollars to cents that you are, I have been nicely fooled," the lawyer remarked. "But I say, the next time a case of this kind comes up give me a pointer, and you can bet your life that I will make the men in the background come down handsomely."

"All right, I will. Keep this matter quiet, of course."

"Oh, certainly!"

The carriage had gone up Broadway, and around Union Square, and then down the street again, and when the conversation came to this point had just passed Canal street.

The superintendent rapped on the window, and the driver, understanding the signal, drove to the lawyer's office, where the counselor alighted, then the vehicle conveyed the police chief to Headquarters.

Everything turned out exactly as the superintendent of police had predicted.

An apparently guileless Dutchman, a man who had made a small fortune in the grocery business, and who now owned a tenement-house in Avenue A, came forward and offered himself as bondsman for the prisoner.

Spurred on by the superintendent of police, the district attorney's men would not accept the bail until a careful examination was made, but as the man was worth the money in real estate, clear of all mortgages, they could not well object and he was taken.

The bond was executed and the prisoner released.

Before the final proceedings were taken, Counselor Have endeavored by a series of skillfully put questions to find out from the man how it was that the Dutchman came to go bail for him.

The prisoner replied, apparently in the frankest manner, that he guessed his aunt fixed it, for she had plenty of money, although she was not willing to admit it, but he refused to give any information in regard to his aunt, where she lived, or could be found, so the lawyer was baffled.

As soon as the Dutchman appeared in the case he was "shadowed" by the orders of the superintendent of police, but nothing derogatory to his character could be found.

He was a stingy old hunk, a regular old miser, a man who bore the reputation of being willing to do almost anything to make a dollar, but not likely to be tempted to break the law even through greed, and when a carefully disguised police spy made his acquaintance in a business way, and took occasion, in a careless manner, to wonder why he had gone bail for Finn, he had replied that he was well paid for so doing by Finn's aunt, and was secured so he could not lose anything if the bail was forfeited.

And the detectives, after scouring New York and its vicinity for the aunt without success, were ready to declare that like Dickens's Mrs. Harris, it was their belief that there wasn't "no sich woman."

The superintendent of police was annoyed; so far the game had gone against him in the most decided manner.

"But it is a long lane which has no turning!" he declared.

CHAPTER XXII.

AGAIN BAFFLED.

THREE weeks went by without anything occurring of interest to the reader of our tale.

The day came when Thomas Finn was to appear before the Bar at the Court of Special Sessions to answer to the accusations brought against him, but the man was absent when his case was called.

Counselor Have rose, said he had not been able to find his client, and had not heard a word from him since he had been released on bail.

Whereupon his bond was declared to be forfeited.

The proper officers immediately made search for the Dutchman.

Acting under orders from the Central Office, the Dutchman had been persistently shadowed, and on the night before the day of the trial at ten o'clock, after filling himself full of beer, the Dutchman had retired to the little room he occupied in the tenement-house, and the shadow relaxed his vigilance, thinking that the game was safe until morning, but when the morning came and the old man did not make his appearance as usual, the spy became alarmed; he investigated the matter and discovered that the Dutchman was not in the house. He had succeeded in evading the vigilance of the watcher.

This discovery was at once reported to Headquarters and a thorough investigation ordered.

The first move that the detectives made was to examine the property records, and, as the superintendent of police expected, it was found that a deed had been placed on record that very morning, transferring the tenement-house.

The affair was immediately looked into and an investigation revealed that the transfer had been made through the agency of a well-known down-town real estate man, whose character was beyond question, and this gentleman, when called upon, freely related all that he knew about the matter. He had never met the Dutchman, or even seen the property.

"About a month ago a Wall street broker put the property into my hands," he stated, "saying that he had been asked by the owner to find a purchaser, but as it was out of his line—although he had interested himself in the affair, on account of the man being an old customer—he wished we would take hold of the matter and he would divide the commission with us; such being the custom in these cases, we accepted the offer, particularly as we had a customer who wanted just such a piece of property, and we knew we could close the trade at once if matters were as represented."

"The deal went through all right, and that is all we know about the matter."

The detective procured the name of the brokers who negotiated the sale, and called upon him.

This gentleman was one of the "small fry" broker, not a member of the Stock Exchange, and his business was not a large one, but his reputation was good, although he was a stranger, and had not been engaged in business long in New York.

When the detective asked for information concerning the real estate deal the man was frankness itself.

His story was the same in the main as the first party.

He gave some information in regard to the Dutchman, though, which gave a clew to what became of him.

On the day before his disappearance he had seen and conversed with the man in his room in the Avenue A house, going there by appointment made by letter. Carried to him there drafts on Bremen for eleven thousand dollars, procured according to his orders, and from some words the Dutchman let slip during the conversation, he got the idea that he intended to sail for Germany very soon.

The superintendent, having got this clew, followed it up.

The Bremen steamer sailed on the morning of the day of trial. Owing to the tide it got away at an early hour, so that the majority of the passengers came on board during the preceding night, and although the name of the Dutchman did not appear on the passenger list, yet from the booking clerk an opinion was obtained that one Peter Snyder, for whom a woman bought a ticket on the preceding day, leaving it in charge of the steward to be called for, was the Dutchman concerning whom information was sought.

There was a little jollification on board the steamer on that particular night, and the clerk had been the guest of the steward when Peter Snyder came on board about eleven o'clock and called for his ticket, so he had a good view of the man.

The superintendent saw at once how the game had been worked, and the "shadow" fooled.

The tenement-house was one of a long block of similar houses.

After the spy had shadowed the Dutchman to his lair, and thought he was secure for the night, the wily fellow ascended to the roof, passed from one house to the other—the roofs being all on the same level, it was an easy matter to do this—and descended through one of the end houses to the street, thus avoiding the watch of the spy, and then had gone to the steamer.

It was some satisfaction to the chief to discover all this, although the knowledge could not be turned to any account.

Of course, if the man had committed a crime, it would have been an easy matter to have secured his arrest by means of the ocean cable the moment he landed at Bremen, but as our laws are it is no crime for a man to sell his property and take ship for Europe, even if he has gone bail for a criminal.

"Wherefore, then, had the watch been placed upon the man?" I fancy I hear a reader ask, "and if the superintendent discovered that the man had disposed of his property, and in-

tended to leave the country, what could he have done?"

Legally he could not have done anything, but as the creature of the law often rises superior to the power which makes it, the chief would have arrested the man, had him carried to headquarters, and there would have endeavored to force him to tell who it was that had got him to go into the bail business, acting on the old, old motto of the end justifying the means.

But the parties in the background had apparently calculated that some such game might be tried, and so they had cunningly arranged to smuggle the Dutchman out of the country.

The superintendent shook his head like a baited bull when the reports were brought to him, and he comprehended that he was powerless to do anything.

The affair had come to an end. The clever piece of work which Hilda Serene had performed in capturing the stage-band had really been barren of results, and the police knew no more of the mystery than they did when the matter was first brought to their notice.

It was late in the afternoon before all the reports were in, and then the superintendent sent a message to Hilda requesting her to come to the theater early that evening, so he could have a chance to talk to her before the performance began.

An arrangement had been made with the manager to use his private box, access to which could be had both from the stage and the front of the house.

In this dilemma, baffled as he was at every turn, the veteran police officer, grown gray in the service, sought counsel from the shrewd, fresh young wits of the girl.

CHAPTER XXIII.

HILDA'S COUNSEL.

At twenty minutes of seven the superintendent of police entered the private box; five minutes after Hilda made her appearance.

She was all dressed for the performance, and had put a dark cloak over her stage costume, so that if any one in the auditorium should happen to catch sight of her no attention would be excited, but as the two sat away in the rear of the box, it was almost impossible for any one to see them.

The superintendent immediately proceeded to describe the state of the case.

Hilda listened attentively until he came to an end.

"If you had known the Dutchman intended to leave the country, you would have arrested him, with the idea of forcing a confession as to who hired him to go bail for Finn," she said, guessing the police chief's intention as accurately as though she had been all her life in the detective business.

"Yes, that was my game; illegal, of course, but we have to stretch a point once in a while to serve the cause of justice."

"Certainly, I can understand that; the rascals employ any and all means to defeat justice, and it would be a shame if you could not take a leaf out of their book once in a while."

"The parties who are engineering the affair are working with wonderful skill," the chief observed. "I think I may say, without exaggeration, that in all my professional experience I have never known a case which has been handled better, and the skill with which they have carried out their plans, and yet remained in the background, is really marvelous; and I can feel that, old and experienced veteran as I am in the rogue-catching business, it would be a feather in my cap if I succeeded in trapping these scoundrels."

"Yes, they are foemen worthy of your steel."

"I have followed this matter up as closely as possible in hopes to get a clew to the parties who are pulling the wires," the superintendent remarked. "In such cases as these it is an easy matter for the rascals to cover their tracks in the first instance, like employing this Dutchman to go bail for Finn. Of course he was secured, or else he would not have done it. Now, if any one could find out who secured him a point would be gained; it is possible that the rascals are working the matter so cleverly that even then we would not get hold of the principals; there may even be two agents between the Dutchman and the ringleaders, but the ferretting out of each agent brings the chase closer and closer."

"Yes, that is the truth, but have you followed up all the clews you have?"

"Certainly, and come to a dead stop; the flight of the Dutchman brings everything to a close."

"How about this broker and the purchaser of the Dutchman's property?" asked Hilda, abruptly.

"What of them?" questioned the superintendent, somewhat surprised by the question.

"Have you had the two shadowed so as to discover whether they may not be agents or principals?"

"Upon my word! you are of an extremely suspicious nature," the police chief declared. "It is the old story, though; the convert usually exceeds the converter, he possesses a zeal which

age and experience has diminished in the older party."

"Is it not right that a good detective should be suspicious of everybody and everything?" the young actress demanded in her abrupt and forcible way. "When on the scent of crime should any one—no matter how high their position nor how spotless their reputation—be exempt from suspicion, if they seemed to be in the remotest way connected with the matter?"

"Egad! I believe you are right, and I must admit that when we ran up against these two parties we stopped just as if we had come to a brick wall which blocked our progress."

"In such a case is it not wise to go over the wall, or if it be too high to be surmounted to go around it? There may be valuable discoveries behind the barrier, to carry out the simile."

"Yes, you are correct; one should not have stopped; yet, really, when I come to reflect upon the matter now, there does not seem to be any reason for going on—no advantage to be gained, as far as I can see," the chief of police observed, reflectively. "We know all about these two parties."

"Would you mind telling me what you know of them?" Hilda asked in the peculiar magnetic way which made her so attractive sometimes, and her eyes shone with the strange light, so that in the semi-darkness of the box, it seemed to the superintendent as though he was looking into the orbs of some animal of the cat tribe, which possessed the power of seeing in the darkness.

"Oh, no, I shall be glad to give you all the information in my power," the police chief answered.

"The broker is named Leander Brakespear; he is doing business in a small way in Wall street; an Englishman, only been in the country for about a year; a younger son of a good family on the other side of the water, and is in receipt of a regular income from there. A very popular young man among the New York bloods, and from them he gets the most of his business."

"Doesn't it strike you that this Mr. Leander Brakespear is what in algebra would be termed an unknown quantity?" Hilda asked, shrewdly.

"Well, I don't know," the chief replied, thoughtfully. "What is there suspicious about the young man?"

"What do you really know of him? Is he what he represents himself to be?"

"That idea occurred to me in the beginning, and I had his case looked into, for I thought that he might be an adventurer from abroad, but my men reported that, as far as they could find out, there wasn't any doubt he was what he represented himself to be."

"That may be, and yet it does not prove that he is above suspicion; there are many Englishmen who are the heirs of noble titles, yet as poor as church mice, who are as big rascals as can be found out of jail."

"Did you inquire concerning his character and habits?" Hilda added.

"Well, no, not particularly, for the report rather threw me off the track; but the shadow said he was about the same as the rest of the set with whom he assorted—drank a little—gambled a little, but not to excess in either line."

"You see how little I know of the detective business, for such a report would have at once excited my suspicions," Hilda remarked. "I would have said, 'here is a man who will bear watching!'"

"No, I think you are wrong in regard to the broker," the superintendent remarked. "My men did make a thorough examination as to his career since coming to New York, not that they suspected there was anything wrong about him, for they did not, but as a mere matter of precaution, and they found everything perfectly straight."

"And the other party—the purchaser of the house."

"It is a woman—a wealthy widow, one of the upper ten, Mrs. Alberta Darlington, a lady who moves in the best society, left independently wealthy by the death of her husband."

"And, therefore, of course, above suspicion," Hilda remarked, with a slight curl of her upper lip.

"You intended to be sarcastic, but really that is the truth. No one in their senses would suspect a woman like Mrs. Darlington, who is familiarly known as the Gilded Widow, to have anything to do with a common rascal like this man Finn."

"Superintendent, do you not believe that the principals in this affair, who have succeeded in baffling you so cleverly, are far superior in every respect to their wretched tool whom I captured?" Hilda asked, abruptly.

The police chief saw the drift of the question, and hesitated a moment before he answered it.

"Well, yes, undoubtedly that is the truth."

"Are you aware whether this broker and Mrs. Darlington are acquainted?"

"No, I am not. But I should imagine that the chances are that they do know each other."

"Now then, put these facts together. The Dutchman has business relations with the

broker. Some one asked the Dutchman to go bail for Finn; the broker is asked by the Dutchman to dispose of his property; Mrs. Darlington comes into the market, anxious to purchase just such a property at this one particular time. If you did not know anything about Mrs. Darlington or the broker—if you were not aware that both of them were above suspicion—would you not be apt to conclude that the purchaser of the property was the one who said to the Dutchman, 'Go bail for this man; I will give you so much money for the service, and after the matter is arranged, will take your house off your hands at your own price, paying you the cash in a lump, so that you can go to Eu-

"Well, yes, but circumstances alter cases, you know. If I did not know the parties I might think so, but as I do know them, I don't," the superintendent replied. "The man, Brakespear, is not rich; he might be led into temptation, but the woman, being wealthy, would not be apt to league with evil-doers."

"Poor argument!" the actress declared, with a shake of the head. "This is an uncertain world, you know, and appearances are deceptive. This woman may not be as wealthy as you think, and then what reason have you to think that money has anything to do with this case at all? So far, there is nothing to show that money could be gained by the attack on Mortimer, or through the abduction of the girl."

"That is very true, but experience has shown me that either money or revenge is at the bottom of ninety-nine out of a hundred crimes, and in a very great majority of cases it is money that is the motive; and, as matters stand, it seems to me that it is not likely that either Brakespear or Mrs. Darlington could have anything to do with this matter."

"It will not do any harm to shadow both of them though," Hilda suggested.

"You are right in regard to that, and I will have it done, if only to satisfy you," the superintendent remarked with a smile.

"I shall be much obliged," Hilda said, soberly. "I suppose it is both foolish and presumptuous for a novice in the detective business like myself to jump to a conclusion, but I have done so, and my opinion is, having gone from the Dutchman to this broker and wealthy widow, you do not need go any further for you have arrived at the principals."

"My dear girl, you are only guessing," the superintendent said in a fatherly way. "You have really no proof to go upon."

"Wait and see if I do not secure some!" Hilda replied.

"Oh, there is another matter that I want to speak to you about," she added, abruptly.

"Go ahead."

"You have put a shadow after me."

"Oh, you have detected it, eh?"

"I should make a very poor detective if I was not able to make the discovery!" Hilda exclaimed, contemptuously.

"And yet the man who is employed to watch you is considered to be one of the best in the business."

"Yes, he does his work well, but I detected him the very first day you put him on my track, the day after I arrested Finn. I came out of the house to go to the theater, this man was lounging on the corner, I happened to catch his eye when I passed, and there I read the truth."

"By Jove! you have quick wits if you were able to do that!" the police chief exclaimed.

"It is the truth; there was a look in the man's eyes which made me suspect that he had been set to play the spy upon me, and in order to satisfy myself upon this point I doubled upon my tracks twice, and the shadow, never suspecting that he was discovered, followed me with the fidelity of a dog."

"I suppose you are puzzled to know why I took this step."

"Oh, no, you thought that the confederates of this Finn would seek to be revenged upon me for the capture of their pal, and so you put a shadow upon my track in order to protect me."

"That is correct."

"Well, I wish you would take him away!" Hilda exclaimed in a very decided tone.

"Take him away!" cried the superintendent in surprise.

"Yes, I want to be attacked!" the young actress announced. "How am I ever to going to get a chance to capture these rascals if you put a man on my track to frighten them away?"

"Upon my word, I never thought of that!" the police chief declared. "My idea was to protect you."

"Don't you worry about that, my dear sir, I can protect myself!" the girl replied, decidedly.

"By Jove! I believe you can!"

"Take off the shadow—let me be the lure to attract the pals of this scoundrel whom I twice have captured, and yet who has both times managed to slip through the fingers of the men to whom I delivered him. If the pals of Finn will only attack me I will be delighted, for then I will have a chance at them, and if I do not improve it I am not worthy to be a police spy."

"The shadow shall be dismissed immediately!"

"Thanks! I have a suspicion that there is a watch on Mr. Mortimer too, for as we walked home together last night, I fancied we were dogged."

"Yes, it is correct, and there is a watcher on the young girl Katherine also."

"It is wise, for it will prevent them from being attacked, but in my case I want to be, so I can get a chance at the fellows."

The entrance of the musicians into the orchestra interrupted the conversation at this point.

"I must be going," Hilda said, rising.

"I will act upon your suggestion about the two parties," the chief said.

"It will do no harm if no good comes of it."

And this ended the conversation.

The superintendent departed, full of the conviction that the Actress Detective was the strangest woman he had ever met.

CHAPTER XXIV. THE PLOTTERS.

THE scene changes now to the luxurious parlor of the Gilded Widow.

She sat by the window gazing out upon the avenue with a frown upon her handsome face which sadly disfigured it.

This was on the afternoon of the day which followed the one whereon the interview between the superintendent of police and the Actress Detective had taken place, as related in our last chapter.

A cab drove up the avenue, halted before the door of the Darlington mansion, and Leander Brakespear got out.

The countenance of the Gilded Widow changed immediately.

"At last!" she exclaimed. "I thought he never would come."

She hastened to the door, and opened it just as the gentleman placed his hand upon the bell.

"I will save you the trouble of ringing," she said. Then she led the way to the parlor.

"You are late," Mrs. Darlington remarked, after they were seated, the doors being carefully closed so they could converse without danger of being overheard.

"Yes; and I don't believe you can guess what detained me."

"You are right," the widow replied, with a slight frown. "I was never good at riddles."

"Well, a spy has been placed upon me."

The lady gave a start, and darted a rapid glance across the street at the stately brownstone house which faced her own.

Brakespear noticed the look and gazed out of the window to see what had attracted her attention, but was not able to discover the cause.

"A spy, eh?" she said, slowly.

"Yes; the fellow has been dogging my footsteps all day long; not that it has done him any good, for he most surely has had nothing but his labor for his pains."

"Well, that is some satisfaction."

"True; but we must take warning, and in the future must be careful how we meet, lest suspicion be attracted. It will not do for us to allow the enemy to see that we are on intimate terms."

"That is correct."

"When I discovered that I was being shadowed I made up my mind to elude the fellow's vigilance."

"And you succeeded in so doing?"

"Oh, yes, and without any trouble. I was careful, of course, not to act in such a manner as to lead the man to suppose that I had discovered his game. Down-town there are quite a number of business houses with two doors on two different streets," Brakespear explained. "I selected a certain one of these houses, then sent my office-boy for a cab, giving him instructions to tell the driver to wait at the door of a particular building, and in order to make sure that the shadow should not follow the boy and so ascertain his errand, I came to the street with him and went into an office a few doors away."

"I anticipate the result: the shadow stuck to you and allowed the boy to go on his way."

"Exactly, and when he was well out of the shadow's reach I returned to my office. The boy was back in ten minutes with the intelligence that the cab had started for the spot. Then I came forth, went to the building, entered by one door, passed rapidly through it, came out at the other, jumped into the cab and was off without seeing anything of my man."

"That was cleverly done!"

"Well, I think myself that the movement was performed in good style," the broker remarked complacently.

"Oh, yes, you easily evaded the watch."

"And in order to be sure that I had done so, for I had a suspicion that there might be more than one man on my track, although I had not been able to discover but the one shadow, I had the cab take a devious course, doubling upon my track three separate times so as to be certain that I was not followed by a spy in another cab."

"Oh, it would be hardly possible that any one would take the precaution to place a pair of watchers upon you!" Mrs. Darlington exclaimed.

"Well, I did not think that it was probable, but I was resolved to be on the safe side."

"The idea was correct. There was but one?"

"Only one! My cab was not followed, and after I satisfied myself on this point I came directly here, and that is the reason why I am late. I lost half an hour by this movement."

"What do you suppose prompted the placing of this spy upon your track?" the Gilded Widow asked, thoughtfully.

"Well, that is rather a difficult question to answer," the man replied, slowly. "As far as I can see, and I think I am as far sighted as the majority of men, there is really no good reason for the movement."

"The only explanation that I can give of the matter is that the police are thoroughly baffled, and in their perplexity they are hitting out at random in all directions like a blind man, hoping by accident to strike a clew."

"Yes, that seems to be the only reasonable explanation."

"I was the broker who negotiated the sale of the Dutchman's property, and some wiseacre has suggested that it might be possible that I was the man who induced the Dutchman to go bail for Finn, and so the detectives have put their shadow upon me in order to discover if there is anything suspicious in my daily walk."

"Yes, the detectives are completely baffled and they are following up every possible clew with hopes of obtaining something tangible upon which to go," Mrs. Darlington observed, thoughtfully.

"I was rather astonished at the circumstance, for I did not think that any suspicion would attach to me."

"In their baffled rage, not knowing which way to turn, the bloodhounds will try every avenue," Mrs. Darlington remarked.

"I gave them the slip cleverly," Brakespear chuckled. "And although, even if I had been followed to your house, the sleuth-hounds could not possibly have made anything out of it, yet I was determined to baffle the shadow if I could."

Mrs. Darlington laughed, but there was something sinister and ominous in her merriment.

"You have a good opinion of yourself, Leander," she said.

"And have I not reason for it?"

"Perhaps; but tell me, if suspicion has been directed to you because you had dealings with the Dutchman, is it not likely that these acute detectives will argue that as I purchased the man's property it is likely I may be fair game?"

"Oh, no, I do not think that is possible!" Brakespear replied, immediately. "You must consider that there is a vast difference between us. In the first place, I am a man and you a woman, and it is a well-known fact that women seldom figure as the master mind in plotting crimes. Then it is well known that I am a man who cannot boast of a large income; my tastes and habits are expensive, and it could be argued that if I saw a chance to make a good round sum, I might be tempted to improve the opportunity, if even at the risk of leaguering myself with those who live by a life of crime. You, on the contrary, are wealthy; you have everything that the heart of a woman can desire, and there is no reason why you should take any risks."

"Well argued, but you are wrong in your conclusion, for suspicion has attached itself to me!" Mrs. Darlington announced.

Brakespear's face became grave.

"Haven't you made some mistake?" he asked.

"It does not seem to be possible, does it?"

"Indeed it does not."

"It is the truth, though!" the Gilded Widow declared. "And the joke of the matter is that you should take so much trouble to throw your shadow off the track, so that he would not be able to report that you had visited me, and yet, when you entered my house, you did so with the full knowledge of a watcher detailed to report in regard to myself."

"Is it possible that this is true?" Brakespear demanded, evidently much annoyed.

"Oh, yes; this shadow business is not what it is supposed to be. It is not possible for the most expert shadow to keep a watch upon a shrewd person, who is on the lookout for such a thing, without the knowledge of the watched one."

"Now, in my case, having a suspicion that something of the kind might be attempted, I have kept my eyes about me. In an avenue like this, it would not be an easy task for a man to keep a watch upon a particular house without attracting attention. The constant presence of a man in the street would be sure to be noticed, and even if there were eight or ten watchers employed, one to relieve the other at irregular intervals, and all of them different in their appearance, the game could not be played upon such a woman as I am without detection."

"No, that is true; the only way would be to place the shadow in a house near at hand," Brakespear observed, thoughtfully, and he now comprehended why the widow had cast such a peculiar glance out of the window just after his entrance to the parlor.

"That is exactly what has been done!" Mrs. Darlington declared. "The opposite house belongs to a prominent lawyer who is a great politician, just the kind of man, you know, to lend

himself to a game of this kind. No doubt he and the superintendent of police are on the best of terms, and the moment the suspicion entered my mind that a shadow might be placed upon me, I conjectured that the lawyer's house would be used for a cover, and so I kept close watch upon it."

"Do you notice that window on the upper side of the house on the second floor?"

Brakespear nodded.

"The inside blinds are closed, and the curtain is down just as if the room was not in use."

"Yes, that is true."

"That is the window of a hall-bedroom, and until to-day the curtain was up and the blinds open."

"I comprehend; the shadow is concealed there."

"Yes, I have a powerful opera-glass, and from behind a blind in my room above, which I arranged so I could watch my watcher without being detected, I have made the discovery that there is a man in the room, and he is apparently playing the spy upon this house."

"Ah, I see, there is no doubt about the matter, and by this dodge one point has been gained," the other remarked, thoughtfully. "The discovery has been made that we are in communication."

"Well, there is nothing out of the way in that," Mrs. Darlington said, carelessly. "If the neighbors, or any of our set, had been questioned, the information could have been gained."

"I am sorry, though, that when you made the discovery that a watch had been placed upon the house, you did not send a message to my office and warn me not to come."

"Oh, no, no!" the Gilded Widow exclaimed. "Reflect upon the matter for a moment; you will see that that would not have been a wise move. It would have been a difficult matter for me to have sent a messenger without attracting the attention of this spy, and no doubt he has arrangements made so that any one coming from this house can be followed."

"Yes, I presume that is true," Brakespear remarked, after thinking the matter over for a few moments.

"Then, if it had been discovered that I had sent a hasty message to you, would it not have appeared as if we were in closer communication than is apparent from a call made by you upon me in the afternoon?"

"Yes, you are right."

"And it was necessary, too, that I should see you in order not only to consult with you about this matter, but to make arrangements for the future, for now that a watch has been placed upon me, it will not be prudent for you to come here again."

"Very true, and we must arrange some way in which we can see each other without these shadows being the wiser for it, for it is absolutely necessary for the success of our plans that we should consult together."

"Yes, I have thought of that, and made all the necessary arrangements."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed Brakespear, surprised by the announcement.

"Oh, yes; although I am a woman, I am prompt to act, and do not allow the grass to grow under my feet!" she declared, with a triumphant laugh.

"I have arranged a scheme which I think will baffle these bloodhounds. I anticipated three weeks ago that suspicion might be directed against us, when the detectives entered upon the matter with such zeal, and embraced an offered opportunity to purchase a house in Fourth avenue directly in the rear of this one, and after I completed the purchase, I took advantage of a night when my servants were out to arrange two boards in the fence between the yards, so as to form a gate; thus, under cover of the night, I can pass from this house to that without danger of any one seeing me."

"You can gain entrance by the basement door; here is the key," and she gave Brakespear the article.

"That is a capital device to foil these bloodhounds," he remarked.

"The only difficult thing about it is: will you be able to gain access to the house without the knowledge of the shadows on your track?"

"Oh, yes, I have already made arrangements to baffle the spies, for from the first I suspected that a watch might be placed upon me," Brakespear replied. "There is a small English ale-house in a cross street, just off Broadway, kept by a man who was a pal of mine in the old country. He is on the 'square' now, for he is doing so well that he would be foolish to try any crooked work, but he bears the brand of the Invisible Hand, and is ready to lend assistance to a brother at any time."

"His place is in the middle of the block between Broadway and Sixth avenue, and as the block is an extremely short one, the yard of the ale-house joins two other yards, both belonging to saloons, one on Broadway and the other on Sixth avenue."

"I can see the advantage of such an arrangement at a glance!" Mrs. Darlington declared.

"In the ale-house I have secured a room, and stocked it with some complete disguises. By going there any time after dark, I can assume a

disguise, and either reach the street through the chop-house, or by means of one of the two saloons, and return to my room in the same way."

"A capital plan!"

"So it appears to me!" Brakespear declared, with a smile of satisfaction.

"Oh, it is, indeed! As clever a one as the mind of man could possibly devise!" Mrs. Darlington exclaimed, with great emphasis.

"Do you think there is any man attached to the Police Department of this City of New York, from the superintendent downward, who will be able to follow on my track?"

"No, indeed!" the Gilded Widow replied. "The shadow who could trace you would have to be more than mortal!"

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BROKER'S SCHEME.

THERE was silence for a few moments, each busy with their own thoughts.

Mrs. Darlington was the first to speak.

"But how is it to be?" she questioned. "Are we so utterly discouraged by our defeats, having completely failed in all our attempts, that we will content ourselves in the future with standing strictly on the defensive?"

"Oh, no, that is not my idea at all," Brakespear replied, promptly. "I am too old a gambler to be discouraged because luck happens to run against me for a while. In such cases I always console myself with the old saying, 'a bad beginning makes a good ending.'"

"I am not at all superstitious and pay but little heed to old adages, but there is one thing I do believe in, and that is luck," Mrs. Darlington remarked, thoughtfully. "There are lucky people and unlucky people. I have met with those whom I would not have connected with me in a business transaction on any account, for failure seems to attend all their efforts. Others, on the contrary, appear to have a golden touch, fortune smiles on their every effort."

"Now, in regard to our schemes, look back! see how everything went well until this actress—this Hilda Serene was encountered, then came nothing but ill luck."

"True, very true!"

"She spoiled the Mortimer game; if it had not been for her it would have succeeded."

"Apparently so."

"The girl, Katherine, too, was in the coupe, all difficulties had been smoothed away, and it appeared certain that the scheme would succeed, then, hey, presto! up like a phantom in the path springs this girl and the affair is a complete failure."

"It was like a miracle!" Brakespear coincided. "Still, it must be admitted that we managed the matter badly. We were foolish to risk sending Finn, knowing that he was wanted by the police; still, he had changed his appearance greatly, and it is safe to say that he could not have been recognized by any one but this girl. Finn was the best man by far for the work in hand and so I risked it."

"And in nine hundred and ninety cases out of a thousand the scheme would have succeeded. It is this actress who appears to be fated to be an evil genius," Mrs. Darlington remarked.

"I am like you in regard to superstition," Brakespear observed. "I attach little weight to signs and omens, but I am a firm believer in lucky and unlucky people. This actress is one of the lucky kind, and there is something about her that puzzles me too, she is so utterly different from any woman that I have ever encountered. I have been to the theater three nights this week, going expressly to study this girl, and the more I see of her the less I like her."

"I took a seat well down in front—the third row from the stage," he explained, "and provided myself with a powerful opera-glass. I studied her as a man would apply himself to a difficult problem."

"And the more you see of her the more you are perplexed, eh?" the Gilded Widow exclaimed.

"Yes, that is the truth."

"It is the case with me. I have gone four times to Niblo's Garden on purpose to study this girl and I took a private box, in which I sat well back so that I would not be observed. I also had an opera-glass with me, and I did not fail to improve every opportunity to use it which the girl afforded me, but I cannot say that I gained anything by my pains. The girl is a riddle which I cannot guess. In fact, so uncertain have I become about her that I have serious doubts as to whether she is a woman or a man in disguise."

"She certainly is extremely masculine."

"Yes, according to the accounts, she handled Finn, who is represented as being a stout, muscular fellow, with the utmost ease, conquering him without difficulty."

"No doubt about that. On the night of the dress rehearsal she knocked him flat with a blow of her fist, using it with as much skill as though she was a regular prize-fighter, and when she intercepted the coupe in Allen street, she dragged him from the driver's box without any trouble, although he resisted to the best of his ability."

"Exactly, as I said, more like a man than a woman!" Mrs. Darlington declared.

"And yet she has all a woman's magnetism about her. There is a peculiar look to her strange gray eyes, a siren-like charm and grace to her movements, and all the time I watched her I was reminded of the tales the ancients told of Egypt's glorious queen, Cleopatra, the far-famed Serpent of the Nile."

"Upon my word! I believe the creature has fascinated you!" the Gilded Widow exclaimed with a scornful laugh. "Why don't you get an introduction to the lady and make love to her? I do not doubt she could be won with very little trouble. The majority of these stage women are generally glad to get husbands of standing and reputation even if they haven't much money. By marrying the woman you would transform her from an enemy into a friend."

Brakespear laughed at the scornful and sarcastic way in which the Gilded Widow spoke.

"Oh, no," he replied, "that would be merely getting out of the fryingpan into the fire and such a thing is not to be thought of. One fact seems certain though to me and that is that the woman must be got out of the way in some manner for she is our evil genius and we will not succeed in our schemes until she is where she cannot possibly interfere with them."

A dark look came over the woman's face; her eyes sought the carpet, she frowned, bit her lip, and tapped the floor impatiently with her slippered foot.

"The project does not meet with your approbation I should judge," Brakespear remarked after a long pause.

"I am afraid!" Mrs. Darlington exclaimed, "and that is a rare thing for me to say, for it is but seldom since I grew to womanhood that I have known what it is to be afraid of anybody or of anything, but I will admit there is something about this actress that terrifies me—something weird and uncanny as the Scotch say. If we were living in the olden time I am sure I should feel called upon to denounce her as a witch."

"No, Leander, no, I do not think it would be wise to attempt to harm this woman; as our Indians would say her 'medicine' is too great, and we would surely come to grief in the attempt."

Mrs. Darlington spoke earnestly, and her voice was low and solemn.

"You are in error," Brakespear replied. "You do not catch my meaning. I have no idea of attempting any violence. I agree with you, the girl's luck is too great, and if we attempted to harm her the chances are great that the blow would recoil on our own heads, but there is a homely old adage which says, 'there is more than one way to kill a cat,' and so I say to you, there are other methods of getting rid of an enemy besides using personal violence."

"Yes, that is true; you are wise not to attempt to harm her, for I am apprehensive that an attack might not only fail but would result in our utter ruin."

"We will arrange the matter differently. This actress is poor and dependent upon her profession for her living. During the past week, since this idea came into my mind, I have frequented saloons which were favorite resorts for actors, made the acquaintance of quite a number of them, and in a guarded way, made inquiries in regard to this Hilda Serene, so, without any particular trouble I learned all that is known about the girl."

"That was wise," Mrs. Darlington commented.

"I always like to be sure of my ground, as a prudent general always examines the field whereon he proposes to fight in advance of the conflict if it is possible for him to do so."

"That is true, and it is a wise precaution."

"I propose to get the girl out of the way; it will cost money, of course, but what are a few thousand dollars when we are playing for a stake worth millions."

"You must expect to spend money to make money; nothing ventured, nothing won!"

"That is true indeed; I shall set about this matter at once, for the quicker we get the actress out of the way the better!" Brakespear declared.

"You are correct, and now in regard to our meetings in the Fourth avenue house. The key admits you to the basement: the number of house is on the tag. All the inside shutters are closed; you will find a lantern in the entry, light it and then proceed to the back room on the second floor; one of the shutters is open so the light will shine through the opening. I will watch for the light and when I see it come to you."

A few more words of trivial import and the interview came to an end, Brakespear departed, and the "shadow" opposite, to whom the broker was known, chuckled wisely as he made a note of the call.

CHAPTER XXVI. A THEATRICAL ROW.

AS we have said, there was at times a peculiar magnetism about Hilda Serene that was particularly attractive to members of the opposite sex.

She was not beautiful in face nor in form, according to womanly standards, for she was al-

together too muscular and masculine, nor particularly witty or attractive in her conversation, yet, for all that, when she chose to exert herself to please, she had a wonderful power over those whom she tried to influence.

Not that the actress was a coquette, or had any idea of making conquests, for all such things seemed to be entirely foreign to her nature.

She was perfectly frank and straightforward, yet was retiring in her disposition, and never sought to make herself prominent.

The manager of the theater, who, of course, was acquainted with the secret of her meetings with the superintendent of police, and understood that they were on public business, had taken a great liking to the girl, and when he came behind the scenes, which he usually did almost every evening during the performance, took pains to converse with Miss Serene.

An old sport, and a thorough man of the world, who had seen a great deal of life, he enjoyed conversing with this girl, who was so entirely different to any woman whom he had ever encountered.

Mortimer, too, and Miss Serene, were on the best of terms, and he almost made it a point to wait and escort Hilda and Miss Amherst home after the performance, a circumstance which gave rise to a great deal of gossip, for the young actor, in spite of his attractiveness, was not what is called a lady's man.

He laughed, when some of his associates joked him about the matter, and said he went home with the girl to keep out of temptation.

"After I get home I take a glass of ale, a bite of something to eat, and go to bed, whereas if I did not go straight home, but stopped in a saloon to get my ale, the chances are that I would fall in with a gang, would take a dozen drinks when I only wanted one, and would not get home until the small hours of the morning, and such a course as that would soon use me up."

That there was a good deal of truth in this all were compelled to admit.

Apart from the manager, Mortimer, and Miss Amherst, who had taken a wonderful fancy to Hilda, the girl had few friends in the company.

The influence of Miss St. Clair, the leading lady, was great, and it was all exerted against Hilda, to whom she had taken a most violent dislike.

Stage life is a petty world in itself, and the actors in the mimic scenes are generally at swords' points with each other.

The trouble with Miss St. Clair was jealousy. She was a good actress; bore the reputation of being one of the best young actresses of the day, as was shown by the fact that she commanded a salary of a hundred dollars a week, and she confidently looked forward to the time when she would shine as a star; in her ambitious dreams James Mortimer figured.

She had fallen in love with him, and in her passion there was a deal of calculation. Mortimer was popular, commanded almost double the salary that she did, and if she succeeded in winning him and becoming his wife, that they could successfully "star" together was almost certain, so it was with envy and rage that she saw the young actor pass her by and devote himself to the girl.

And the leading lady from the beginning laughed at the idea that Hilda had saved Mortimer from the bullet of the stage hand.

No argument could convince Miss St. Clair that the man had really sought to kill the young actor; she believed that it was an accident, and that Hilda had seized upon the circumstance with rare cunning, to make a heroine of herself.

She was up-stairs in her dressing-room at the time the affair occurred, and so did not have the evidence of her own eyes.

Miss St. Clair's influence was great, for she was a favorite with Moses Bolosso, the elder brother, and the managing man of the two, and it was whispered that if "mein brudder" could only succeed in getting a divorce from the frau from whom he had been separated for a couple of years, he would gladly take Miss St. Clair for a partner.

Hilda went quietly on her way, attending to her business to the best of her ability, never taking any notice of Miss St. Clair's sneering ways.

Louise Amherst did, though; she was hot-headed enough to resent anything said about Hilda, and she and Miss St. Clair had had several verbal rows.

"The nasty thing!" Louise confided to Hilda. "I am sure I shall slap her face one of these days!"

"Oh, no, you must not do that!" Hilda exclaimed. "That would not be lady-like; you are a lady, and ladies do not fight."

"Well, but you are a lady and you can fight," the other argued.

"Yes, but I do not; I would be about the last girl in the world to have any trouble."

"Do you know that this horrid, stuck-up thing has threatened openly to slap your face, the first good chance she gets!" Louise blurted out.

Hilda laughed, but there was a gleam of fire in her great gray eyes, and the peculiar greenish tinge began to appear.

"Well, if Miss St. Clair knows when she is well off, she will not try anything of the kind," Miss Serene said, a world of meaning in her quiet tones.

"I am afraid that you would forget all about being a lady, and be inclined to handle her as you did the stage hand."

"If she so far forgets herself as to attack me in such a manner, I would most surely give her such a lesson, that she would never want to slap another woman's face as long as she lives!" Hilda declared.

But this threat of violence was all an idle vaunt on the part of the leading lady. She had heard the story of Miss Serene's encounter with the stage hand, and had no notion of having any personal difficulty with the woman she hated so bitterly.

She had made up her mind to do all she could to injure her, though, and she hoped in time to be able to drive her from the company.

All she wanted was an opportunity.

It came at last.

On a certain evening Miss St. Clair was not at all like herself. She had been out with a gay party of friends that afternoon, included in which were the Bolosso Brothers.

Champagne had flowed freely, and sad the truth to tell, Miss St. Clair drank much more wine than was good for her. She was not used to drinking, and the wine went at once to her head.

After she got home she was dreadfully sick, but by lying down until it was time to go to the theater, she managed to get there and go on apparently all right.

No one in the front of the house could have told that there was anything the matter with her from her speech or walk, but she was not able to act at all and merely "walked" through the part.

In the last act the lights and the heat made her head dizzy and she stumbled in her lines.

There was a halt for a moment—a "stick" as it is called in stage parlance, which Hilda cleverly covered up by speaking out of her turn and so set the conversation going again.

In a few minutes Logadere settled the account of the ruffian duke; "My oath is kept, first the hirelings, and then the master. Blanche, you are mine, and I am here, stanch and true!" and down came the curtain amid the plaudits of the audience.

Hardly had the green baize shut out the sea of heads in front when a "row" commenced on the stage.

Miss St. Clair was boiling over with indignation.

"How dare you show me up to the audience just because I hesitated a moment by taking the words right out of my mouth?" she demanded, half-crying with rage and mortification.

"I am sure, Miss St. Clair, I did not intend to show you up; there was a wait and I covered it up as well as I was able," Hilda replied, speaking as pleasantly as possible. She had divined what was the matter with the girl. Her wild Western life had made her used to that sort of thing; she was really sorry for the girl and admired the plucky way in which she had fought through the night.

"No such thing, there wasn't any wait! I would have spoken if you had given me a chance. You did it on purpose, and I think it is outrageous to treat me in such a way," and the girl began to cry.

"No, no, you have made a mistake; I would not do anything to offend you for the world," Hilda replied, gently, sorry for the distress of the other.

At this point the stage-manager thought that it was a fine opportunity for him to put in a word. He was a middle-aged man of poor abilities, who made up by senility, and readiness to do all the dirty work required, for his lack of talent.

He knew that Miss St. Clair hated Hilda, and that the leading lady was a favorite of the managers, and so he eagerly seized upon the chance to curry favor.

"Miss St. Clair is perfectly correct!" he declared, with the air of a great mogul whose word was to settle the whole business. There was no wait—I was at the book, and Miss Serene really was greatly to blame for speaking without her cue, and I am astonished that she should act in such an unprofessional manner!"

In three strides Miss Serene was across the stage, facing the stage-manager, and so near that she could have taken him by the throat if she had so desired.

"How dare you give utterance to such a falsehood!" she exclaimed, in deep, earnest tones, which came from her throat as clear as a silver bell. "You know you were not at the book when the stick occurred. You were not in the prompt wing at all, but in the second entrance, talking to the master-carpenter with your back to the stage, and you knew nothing whatever about the matter, for you took no notice of what was going on on the stage, and you cannot tell for the life of you now where the stick occurred!"

The strange green light was glowing in the actress's eyes, and she towered above the old stage-manager, who was a little, dried-up man, like an angry goddess.

The official, completely surprised by this unexpected attack, knew not what to say, for the girl had uttered the truth, so, like most men under like circumstances, he fell back on his dignity.

"Here, here, you must not talk in that way to me!" he blustered. "Do you know who I am? I am the stage-manager, and I will give you your walking ticket if you dare to talk back to me."

"Oh, come off, Snoop!" exclaimed Mortimer, in his deep disgust falling unconsciously into the slang of the day. "You don't know what you are talking about. You will not discharge anybody! You haven't got any more authority to do that than a brass monkey!"

"I am astonished, Mr. Mortimer, to find you upholding any such insubordination!" the stage-manager declared, dismayed by this unexpected attack.

"Well, you ought not to be, for Miss Serene is right and you are wrong, and you have made a donkey of yourself by interfering in the matter. I myself saw you standing in the second entrance with your back to the stage when the stick occurred, and you never took any notice of it, and you are no more qualified to give an opinion as to who is right and wrong than if you had been up in Harlem."

"I don't believe in men interfering when ladies get into a dispute," the actor continued, before the astonished stage-director could collect his wits sufficiently to think of a reply. "And so, under the circumstances, I should not have said anything, but as long as one man has jumped into the breach, and on the wrong side at that, I don't see any reason why I should not follow."

"Mr. Mortimer, this is really too cruel, for you to take sides against me!" Miss St. Clair declared, between her sobs.

Mr. Moses Bolosso made his appearance at this moment, considerably the worse for liquor, for he had not gone home and slept off the effects of the wine which he had indulged in during the afternoon, but on the contrary, had taken a few more glasses during the performance.

He was not drunk, for he could both walk and talk as well as ever, but he was decidedly high-strung and flighty.

"Vat ish der matter?" he cried, his accent worse than usual.

"Oh, Mr. Mortimer is saying such cruel things to me!" Miss St. Clair moaned. "Miss Serene has behaved dreadfully mean—made a regular show of me in the last act, boo-hoo!" And the sobs came thick and strong.

The Jew speculator was just in the condition to want to show his authority, particularly as only a minor member of the company was concerned, and Miss St. Clair had been artfully working upon him for some time by repeating tales of Miss Serene's short-comings, so now he felt like "going for her," as the boys would say.

"I think you had better make some pisness somewhere else, hey?" he cried angrily, shaking his skinny forefinger at Hilda. "I took you into mine troupe out of mere charity, because I knew you wanted a job pad, and now you do nothing but makes troubles! You had better walk off on your ear, ain't it! I gife you ze grand bounce!"

"Hold on, hold on, what is all this row?" cried the sonorous voice of the manager, advancing suddenly into the midst of the party and cutting off the indignant speech which was on Mortimer's lips.

"Who is going to get the grand bounce, and what for?"

The Jew was just drunk enough to resent the interference of the manager.

"This ish mine pisness!" he exclaimed.

"Is it? Well, you can bet your ducats that I am going to have some show in the fun if there is going to be any!" the manager retorted, tartly. "What is the trouble, Mortimer?"

"There was a stick in the last act, Miss Serene took it up, and Miss St. Clair blames her for doing so; the stage-manager lies about the thing, trying to throw the blame on Miss Serene. I sailed in for justice and the 'main guy' who knows nothing at all about the affair, and who is, from all appearances, about three sheets in the wind, jumps to the conclusion that Miss Serene is to blame and has discharged her."

In this quaint, terse manner, blending stage and nautical "argot" together, the young actor delivered the explanation.

"Three sheets in the wind," growled the manager under his breath; "blame the Jew fraud, I should think he was about a dozen!"

"Yesh, yesh, it ish mine pisness! I hafe discharge dot girl!"

"Where is McCormick? Where is my cop?" roared the manager at the top of his voice. "Send the peeler to me!"

The manager was getting angry and the slang of his early days was coming out.

"See hyer, Bolosso, I was in my box and saw the bull blamed business. If Miss Serene hadn't taken it up there would have been the most

blamed stick that was ever seen on this hyer stage! And the next time that you take any of your girls out and fill them up chuck full to the neck with champagne, for heaven's sake, give them time to go home and sleep it off before you put them on the stage to act!"

This was quite enough for Miss St. Clair. She grew fairly scarlet in the face and fled to her dressing-room as fast as she could go.

She had received a temperance lesson which would last for many a year.

To do the girl justice she was was not used to drinking wine, or any kind of liquor; in fact, if she had been it would not have made her so sick.

The manager had met the party driving through Central Park in an open barouche in great style, and knowing that the Bolossos had come to the theater well under the influence of liquor he had made a shrewd guess as to what was the matter with Miss St. Clair.

"Nothing the matter mit mine girls!" cried the Jew, indignantly. "Vat you mean, hey?"

"Say, you are as full as a goat!" exclaimed the manager in a tone of deep disgust. "I don't believe you could see a hole through a forty foot ladder! Just you wait till my copper, McCormick comes and I will show you a turn which will astonish your weak nerves, I think."

The Jew was not so drunk as not to understand that the manager had given utterance to a threat.

"Hey? Vat you vant your cop for—vat vill he do?"

"What will he do? He will fire you into the street neck and heels!" the manager declared.

The Jew fairly grew black in the face with rage and indignation.

"Vat ish dot? you fire me oudt, hey?"

"You bet!" the other declared, emphatically.

"You talk about giving any one the grand bounce. Just you wait until McCormick runs you through the back door into Crosby street and then you will have a good idea what a genuine grand bounce is."

The Jew was so angry and excited that he fairly began to dance up and down.

"Vat you mean—you will not dare?"

"Will I not? Just you wait until the cop comes and then you will see about that! You are as full as a tick! and I don't allow any drunken men on my stage. I will fire you out in a way to make your head swim!"

"I am not drunk—I am all right, and if you hafe your bouncer touch me I will hafe you into der court."

"Oh, you are so full that you don't know what you are saying!" the manager cried, in a tone of deep disgust. "And see here, I want you to get all your men together and take your traps out of here as early in the morning as you can."

"Hey, w'at ish dot?" cried Bolosso, who could hardly believe he heard aright.

"I say to get your traps away as soon as the Lord will let you!"

"I hafe two more weeks after this one!" the Jew cried.

"Not by a jugful! I have given you the grand bounce! you have broken your contract!"

"How ish dot?" exclaimed the other, in amazement, also sobered by this startling blow.

"You have broken your contract!"

"How was dot?"

"You can't play any snide show on me!" the manager declared. "Discharge your good people, and fill with bad ones!"

"I vill sue for damages!"

"Sue and be hanged! that is a game that two can play at. I have got as much money to pay lawyers as you have. This show has got to run on just as it has been running or off it comes for good!"

"Mine gootness! can I not be der boss of mine own show?" the Jew cried, who had just got the idea of the game that the manager was playing on him into his head, and was greatly disgusted at it.

"Not when it is in my theater!" the manager replied, with firm determination.

The Jew weakened; he saw that the manager was determined, and he wanted no lawsuits and lawyers with their big fees.

"Oh, well, it ish all right. I do not vant to quarrel mit anybody, or to makes some trouble," he said, in a crestfallen way. "Und if you say dot Miss Serene vas in der right, dot settles it, und I am much obliged dot she pulls der piece through."

"All right, and now if you will take my advice you will go home and get to bed as soon as you can, and if you feel rocky in the morning, you will find that bottle of Hathorne water, followed by a cocktail, is the best thing to brace up on," the manager remarked.

The Jew retreated without saying a word, and at this moment the red-whiskered policeman made his appearance, rushing on the stage in hot haste, having been informed that his presence was urgently desired.

He had his club out all ready for action, judging from the tone of the message that a small riot had broken out.

Astonished at finding that everything was quiet and peaceful he came to an abrupt halt in

front of the manager with his mouth open, all out of breath from his haste.

"Phat the matter?"

"McCormick, do you think it is going to rain?" the manager asked in a deep and earnest tone.

"How the divil would I know?" cried the policeman in utter astonishment.

Everybody roared in laughter, much to the amazement of McCormick, who could not for the life of him see anything funny in the matter, and the groups on the stage broke up and a general rush was made for the dressing-rooms.

As Hilda passed the manager, he lifted his hat. She smiled and said in a half-whisper:

"I am very much obliged, sir."

"Not at all; a simple act of justice only," he answered.

There was a little crowd at the foot of the stairs which led to the dressing-rooms, as there were some twenty odd people all came to go up at the same time, and Hilda, who was among the last, was on the edge of the throng.

The stage-manager had witnessed the exchange of words between the actress and the manager, and, smarting under the rebuke which had been administered to him, took occasion to remark in a tone loud enough for Hilda to hear:

"It is better to be born lucky than rich, but I did not know before that this Serene girl owned both the theater and the manager!"

With wonderful quickness Hilda wheeled around; two strides and she confronted the sneerer, a single moment and her sinewy hand clutched him by the collar, the iron-like knuckles pressing into his throat like so many pieces of metal, and the gray-green eyes glared into his face like two balls of fire.

"You are an old man, Mr. Snoop, old enough to be my father, and I should hate to have to punish you as I would a young and reckless boy," she said, in the deep, earnest tones which had in them something which strangely reminded one of the roar of a wild beast, "full of sound and fury." "But I must protect myself! I cannot allow any one, no matter if they are old enough to be my grandsire, to abuse me. Have the kindness to take back and apologize to me for the words which you just uttered."

Never was there a man more thoroughly frightened; his face grew absolutely white with terror.

So completely was he under the control of fear that if the actress had demanded that he should kneel down that she might walk over him, there is no doubt that he would have prostrated himself with the utmost alacrity.

He apologized in the most abject manner.

Then Hilda released him and proceeded to her dressing-room, the wonder of all observers.

"Great heavens!" cried Snoop, after she was gone. "I would as soon face a hungry tiger as to have any trouble with that woman!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

HILDA SPEAKS PLAINLY.

MISS AMHERST had not commenced to undress when Hilda entered the room, but sat in a corner crying.

"Why, Louise, what is the matter?" the young actress exclaimed, hastening to her friend.

"Nothing—nothing at all, boo-hoo!" and the tears came out afresh.

"Why, yes, there is—what is it?"

"It isn't anything, I tell you! I'm only crying from nervousness!" the girl replied. "I heard all the row from the entry and I got so excited that when it was over I came into the dressing-room and cried like a good fellow!"

"Well, it is all over now and no harm is done, so dry your eyes, get off your things and let us hurry home as fast as possible."

Louise got up and proceeded to obey the injunctions.

"Well, I must say that you are the strangest girl that I ever saw," Miss Amherst declared.

"How so?"

"You haven't shed a tear!"

"Why should I cry? What is there to cry about?"

"Wasn't you excited?"

"No, not particularly."

"Well, I was. Talk about pins and needles—if it doesn't just express the feeling."

"I do not believe that I have nerves like the other girls," Hilda admitted.

"That is true enough, I am sure. Here I, that had nothing to do with the trouble, have been bellowing away like a big baby, and as for Miss St. Clair—she's in the next room, you know," and Miss Amherst lowered her tone—"she has been crying in there as if her heart would break, and she was fairly howling as she came up-stairs."

"I do not doubt that she was terribly mortified. It was a terrible thing that the manager said, and what made it worse was that there was a great deal of truth in it."

"Yes, our dear leading lady has got a lesson which will be apt to last her for one while," Louise observed with a giggle of merriment, as she recalled Miss St. Clair's precipitate flight, thus quickly changing from tears to smiles.

"She was very sick at the boarding-house be-

fore she came to the theater, wasn't she?" Hilda inquired.

"Sick! Well, I should say so!" the other replied. "And the joke of the thing was, that in the morning she was boasting to me of what a good time she was going to have, and when she came back and had to rap upon the wall for me—she has the room next to mine, you know—"

Hilda nodded.

"Well, when I went in she was a sight! Her face was as white as your handkerchief, and she was so weak from getting the nasty stuff off of her stomach, that she could hardly move!"

"I suppose she was not used to wine."

"No; after she got well enough to talk, she told me that she had never drunk a dozen glasses before in her life. Sick! Well, I bet you! If you could only have seen that poor girl! I know that there isn't any love lost between you, and I myself have had many a spat with her, but you could not help pitying her as I did!"

"I presume not."

"If it hadn't been for her coach she would have never got to the theater, and it is really a wonder how she managed to get through as well as she did."

Miss St. Clair, although she only lived a few blocks away from the theater, indulged in the luxury of a carriage to carry her to and from the playhouse. "Just a star, who was making a mint of money!" her professional associates declared with indignant sarcasm, and this one circumstance gave rise to a great deal of talk.

In no profession in the world is there so much envy and petty jealousy displayed as in the theatrical, and when a brother or sister is in need, the manner in which the petty feelings disappear and the "play-actors" come forward shoulder to shoulder to assist, is deserving of the warmest praise.

It did not take the ladies long to remove their stage costumes and get ready for the street.

At the back door they found Mortimer waiting for them.

He had been chatting with the old door-tender in regard to the trouble which had occurred, and the surly old man who was regarded as being as hard as flint, took pains to speak to Miss Serene about the matter.

"Well, my dear, you come out right side up with care after all," he said with the air of a father. "Don't you worry! you are a good girl and the Lord looks out for his own! My boss is a good man. I've kept door here for thirty years and he is as good a man as I ever worked for. He may be a little rough once in a while, but his heart is in the right place. Just let him understand who is incorrect and he'll stand up for the right like a major."

"All I can find fault with is his sending for McCormack!" he added, reflectively. "That Irish farrier is no good; all he had to do was to pass the word for me and I would have necked that fraud of a Jew and put him out in the street so quick that it would have frightened him out of ten years' growth."

Miss Serene thanked the old man for his expression of good will, and then the three departed.

"Well, if you ain't a witch, Hilda, I'm a Dutchman!" Miss Amherst declared with great emphasis after the three got into the street and away from the theater.

"Is that so? Why, I thought you were Irish or Jew!" Mortimer declared in the most matter-of-fact way. Above all things he loved to torment the lively Miss Louise.

"You horrid thing!" the lady cried, making a face at him. "Irish is bad enough, but don't cry Jew if you don't want to lose my friendship forever."

"Heaven forbid that such a calamity shall fall upon me!" Mortimer cried in mock tones.

"Now do keep quiet! You are worse than a woman! You chatter so much you make me forget what I want to say!" Miss Amherst declared.

"Oh, now I remember!" she added. "I was going to say that you must be a witch, or you never could have got that gruff old doorkeeper to take any notice of you. I have played at Niblo's a dozen times at least, and with my natural disposition to be agreeable—"

"With everything that wears pantaloons you flirt!" added Mortimer in an undertone.

"Be quiet! You want to break up the thread of my thoughts again, but you can't do it! I have always treated the old man in the politest manner, and he never takes any more notice of me than if I were an Italian bootblack. I always am particular to say good-morning or good-evening and good-night to him, and he usually growls a sort of gruff 'humph' in return, although when I came on this engagement and said in my sweetest manner, 'I suppose you haven't forgot me?' he was gracious enough to growl, 'Back again, hey?' and Miss Amherst gave a laughable imitation of the old man."

"Really, Miss Louise, this attempt of yours to flirt with that aged doorkeeper is frightfully reprehensible!" Mortimer declared, gravely. "Can you not find some foeman more worthy of your steel? Why do you not try your arts of

fascination upon me, charming creature that you are?"

"And get Hilda here after me? Oh no, I guess not. I know better than that!" retorted Louise.

The shot struck home; it was not often that the girl managed to silence the young actor in these chaffing matches, but on this occasion she did so most effectually.

But the retort seemed to throw a wet blanket over the three, for there was hardly a word more exchanged until they reached the boarding-house.

Then in the entryway Mortimer bid the girls good-evening according to his usual custom, and went off to his room, which was in another part of the house from where theirs was situated.

Hilda's room was on the same entry as Miss Amherst's, but on the opposite side.

"Come into my room after you get your things off and I will stand treat," Miss Amherst said. "I haven't been feeling well lately, and was complaining to the manager, and he told me that all I needed was a little tonic, and that the best thing would be to get a bottle of good port wine and take a wine-glassful three times a day, and to be sure and take one at night, just before going to bed, with a couple of biscuit or a sandwich or something of that sort, and he added that grown men and women were about the only creatures in the world stupid enough to go to bed on an empty stomach; even babies knew better, and no animal would be idiotic enough to go to sleep until it had plenty to eat, if it could possibly be obtained."

"That is exactly like him; he is an odd genius," Hilda remarked, with a smile.

"Well, I have tried it three days now, and, would you believe it, it works like a charm! I feel ever so much better."

"Oh, yes, there is no doubt that the prescription is a good one."

"Come in and I will stand treat. I've got two big sandwiches, and can treat you to a royal banquet."

"All right! Such a tempting offer is not to be refused. I'll come!"

Then the girls repaired to their rooms, removed their street dresses, put on their wrappers and then Hilda went to Miss Amherst's apartment.

Louise, who was as brisk as a bee, had a little table with a towel spread on it for a table-cloth, and on it were the sandwiches and wine.

"Sit down and make yourself comfortable, dear; take the rocking-chair—I had just as lief have a common one!" Louise said, in the most hospitable manner.

Hilda tried to decline, but Miss Amherst insisted, so she took the rocker.

Louise poured out the wine.

There you are! now help yourself to a sandwich; isn't this jolly, eh? You must come in every night, for I am awful lonesome sitting here all alone, munching my bread and meat, and drinking my wine."

"You must allow me to pay for half the wine, then, and I shall be delighted to come."

"All right; that is a go!" Miss Amherst declared. "I'm horrid slangy, ain't I?"

"Not so bad as the average Fifth Avenue belle, if one may believe the stories in the newspapers."

"That is true enough. I got acquainted with a millionaire's daughter in Boston once, and the way that girl could talk slang would have made any of the dizzy variety blondes turn green with envy. But in regard to paying for half the wine, if the next bottle doesn't cost any more than this, your pocketbook will not suffer."

"How is that?"

"It is a present from the manager," Louise replied, a little bit confused. "Now don't you go and think that I have made a mash of him or anything of that kind, for it isn't so. He is just a jolly fellow, nice to talk to, and always jokes with me, but I am not the kind of girl to make mashes. I always take good care of myself, and never give any one a chance to talk about me."

"That is true, I am sure; from what I have seen of you, no one could possibly behave better than you do, although you are about as full of fun as an egg is of meat."

"That is true; 'care killed a cat,' and you can bet all your ducats that I don't intend to die that way!" the lovely girl declared. "By the way, dear, you are not afraid of getting into bad habits if you come and take a glass of wine with me after the show?"

"Oh, no, there is no danger. You forget that I have played principally in the wilds of the West, where whisky is as common as water, and I don't mind admitting to you, dear, that I can drink just as well as any man that ever stood up to a bar!"

"You don't say so!" cried Louise, opening her eyes wide in astonishment.

"I hope you will not think any the worse of me for the honest confession."

"Well, no," the other answered, slowly, as if she did not know exactly what to make of the matter. "But you don't really mean to say that you can drink whisky, brandy, and all the rest of the horrid stuff just like a man?"

"Yes, it is true; it does seem strange, I sup-

pose, to hear a woman make such a confession, but it is a fact. I was brought up in the mines where liquor was about the only medicine that could be procured in case of sickness and so I got used to the taste of it long before I got out of my teens."

"Isn't that odd?"

"And now comes the strangest part of all," Hilda remarked. "Liquor, no matter how strong or how vile, has no more effect upon me than so much water. I do not believe there is a man in the world that I cannot stand up with and drink glass for glass until he goes under the table."

"Well, well, upon my word, I never heard anything like this in all my life!" Louise declared in wonder.

"It is strange, I know, so strange as to be almost incredible, but it is true," Hilda declared. "The discovery that liquor had no effect upon me was made when I was only a little girl, and it was a common amusement of the rough miners, among whom I was brought up, to astonish and 'clean out' strangers who came to camp by betting that they had a child in the place who could drink any man under the table and not half try either, and many is the bet that I won for the men who backed me in this way."

"Whatever could your father and mother have been thinking of to allow you to be brought up in such a dreadful way!" cried the soubrette in righteous indignation.

And then perceiving that Hilda hesitated to reply, a sudden idea came to her.

"Oh, perhaps you hadn't any father or mother!" she cried. "That would account for it."

"I had both," Hilda answered in calm yet sad tones.

"Perhaps I am causing you pain by my foolish question!" Louise exclaimed. "Forgive if it is so, but, Hilda, I do take such an interest in you, for every thing about you is so strange and marvelous; you are so entirely different from any woman that I ever came in contact with in my life. Everything about you is as interesting to me as a fairy tale to a young one."

"Is that so?" Hilda asked with a smile.

"Yes, indeed it is!" Louise declared, earnestly. "I haven't known you but a little while, and yet it seems to me that we are just as well acquainted as though we had been together all our lives, and I love you as dearly as though you were an older sister, you great, big, horrid, dear, delightful, masculine, fighting girl, you!"

And then, without any ceremony, Louise jumped up, plunged herself down in Hilda's lap, put her arms around her neck, gave her a vigorous hug, winding up with a couple of hearty kisses, which Hilda returned with ardor.

"Ah, Louise, I believe that you are really and truly my friend!" she exclaimed.

"I am, if there is such a thing as friendship in this world!" Louise declared, and then after kissing Hilda again in the most affectionate manner, she resumed her seat.

"Oh, there is no doubt that such a thing as friendship does exist!" Hilda declared. "The history of the world is full of records of men and women who have been willing to die for each other, a willing sacrifice on the altar of friendship. The story of Damon and Pythias is no fable, and friends as staunch and true live now in the world as ever ancient Greece could boast."

"Yes, I am sure that is true, for I would be willing to do anything for you!" the other declared.

"If the time ever comes, perhaps I may be able to show you that you could not possibly be willing to do any more for me than I would do for you!" Hilda returned.

"Ain't that nice?" Louise exclaimed, with a beaming smile. "And now, dear, that you know how I feel toward you, I hope you will not think that I am inquisitive when I declare that I am fairly hungry to know every little bit of your history, you strange man-woman!"

"Well, my life has not been an uninteresting one," Hilda replied. "And some day, when I feel in the humor for talking, perhaps I will tell you all about it."

"That's a dear!"

"But in regard to my parents permitting me to be placed on exhibition, as it were, in the strange and unnatural way of which I spoke, it can readily be understood why they were willing when I say that for twenty years before my father's death, which took place when I was a girl of fifteen, he had hardly drawn a sober breath: he was steeped in liquor almost constantly."

"How dreadful!" Louise exclaimed.

"Yes, and my wretched mother was but little better. She died when I was ten years old, leaving me to grow up like a weed."

"Well, well, of all the romantic histories!"

"But as I was naturally quick and apt I got quite a good education, although I never went to school a day in my life, but in our little isolated camp, away up in the mountains a hundred miles from any town of importance, there were plenty of educated men following the miners' life, who took pleasure in teaching me, for it was amusement to them, and as my mind began to expand under their teachings, it was a

sort of wonderment to me that men of such refinement, education and ability, should live in such a God-forsaken region, afar from all the comforts and luxuries of civilization."

"It certainly was strange."

"Not when the facts in the case are understood," Hilda explained. "There was hardly one of these men who was not a fugitive from justice for crimes committed in civilized communities."

"Oh, yes, I see."

"They herded together like wolves in the mountains, because they were outcasts, Ishmaelites, against whom, in regions where law and order was respected, every man's hand was turned."

"My goodness! What a bringing up for a girl!" the soubrette declared, in wonder.

"Yes, but these outlaws and outcasts were all good to me, and almost every man in the camp tried to teach me that which he knew best, so I, the wild child of the everlasting hills, grew up possessed of most of the accomplishments of a modern belle, carefully educated for the fashionable drawing-room, with a view to catching a wealthy husband, and in addition, the expertness in weapons, cards, dice and all sorts of rough, rude masculine sports of these outcast men who went about holding, as it were, their lives in the hollow of their hands."

"Oh, what a book your life would make!" Louise declared.

"I may write it one of these days when I get into the sere and yellow leaf," the other replied.

"Don't forget to put me in as one sincere and devoted friend, even if you never take a fancy to another girl!"

"Friends are too scarce with me to be lightly forgotten!" Hilda replied.

"But to return to the point from which I started; it was my wonderful ability to drink the fiery liquor with about as much impunity as though it was so much water that made me the wonder of the camp."

"One day a doctor came into the settlement, an educated man who had once held a fine position in the East but had ruined himself by his appetite for strong drink."

"The miners tried to fleece him by offering to bet that they had a child of tender years who could drink more than he could, but he was sober, in possession of his wits and laughed at the hunter—the first man who had ever struck the camp who had not jumped eagerly at the chance to, apparently, win money, so easily."

"Oh, no, gentlemen," he said, "you cannot ring in any cold deal on me! Shukels are scarce with me just now and I hav'n't got any to throw away."

"In vain the crowd assured him that the game was a fair one—that there was no catch in it, and no undue advantage would be taken of him."

"It was really not the man's money that they were after but the chance of laughing at him for being beaten by a child."

"But the more the crowd talked, the more the doctor laughed."

"Oh, no, boys, you have got the wrong pig by the ear this time!" he declared. "Although I have never seen your game, nor even heard of it, yet I understand it just as well as though I had seen it played a dozen times. I am a doctor, gentlemen, and I flatter myself that I am as well posted in all the discoveries and traditions of my trade as any man that you will be apt to scare up on this side of the herring-pond."

"I know exactly the sort of game that you are putting up. You have got hold of an abnormal case—one out of fifty or a hundred million, there are only an instance or two reported in the books since the days of Golden, which is going back almost to the fountain spring of medical literature—a child whose system at birth was so saturated with alcohol that strong liquor has absolutely no effect—a patient more likely to get drunk on water than on whisky—the result, it is conjectured by the able men who have made a study of the subject, due to excessive indulgence in liquor by the ancestors of the child, going back possibly for three or four generations. Possibly I can make the position plainer to you, gentlemen, by stating that it is about the same as Jenner's discovery that by inoculating a man with cow-pox, the likelihood of his taking small-pox was greatly reduced. The system of the child is so full of alcohol that more alcohol introduced into it produces no effect."

"Well, now, that man knew something!" Louise declared, following the tale with great interest.

"Yes, the miners rated him to be the greatest sharp in the scientific line that ever struck the town. He took a great interest in me, after we became acquainted, and to him I am indebted for the best part of my education."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

MORE OF THE SAME.

"WELL, really, when you began I had no idea that it was going to be so interesting!" said Louise. "Oh, what a dull, commonplace, humdrum life mine appears to be after listening to the story of your early career."

"Yes, there are but few in the world, I fancy, who can tell of so strange a childhood as mine was."

"Now that I know your history, I do not wonder that you are so self-reliant, so able to fight your own battles."

"Yes, all my early training was in that direction," Hilda answered.

"But really, can you drink liquor just the same as if it was water, and does it not have any more effect on you?" the other asked, hardly able to believe that such a marvelous thing could be true.

"Yes, it has no more taste to me than water. All liquors are the same to me. If you were to blind my eyes, and give me some wine, whisky, brandy or pure alcohol, I could not tell the difference between them."

"Isn't that strange?"

"I sip your wine out of pure good fellowship, but if you gave me water I should like it just as well as far as enjoyment goes."

"Oh, you mean thing you!" Louise exclaimed.

"You wanted to cheat me by paying for half the wine when it doesn't do you any good and you do not enjoy drinking it."

"Oh, my dear Louise, I do enjoy your company, though!"

"Yes, but there is no use of your throwing away your money for wine; you see, I have a frugal soul."

"Yes, yes, but no one but yourself will say that, though."

"But really, joking aside, there isn't any use of your paying for wine that you don't enjoy. But you must have something to keep me company; what would you like? Tell me honestly now, and I will see that you have it, for I can foresee that we are going to have many a cozy midnight chat together before our season ends, for after we get on the road we will room together—now don't you say 'no' for my heart is set on it!" Louise declared with the air of a spoiled child.

"Very well, dear, it shall be as you wish."

"And now you big man-woman, what will you have for your midnight lunch?"

"A cup of coffee would suit me better than anything else."

"Oh, my! I should not be able to sleep a wink if I took coffee!" Louise declared.

"It does not affect me at all, but I believe I can sleep anywhere and under almost any conditions."

"You shall have your coffee. I will get a tiny coffee-pot and one of those contrivances to put on the burner and make the coffee by the aid of the gas every night. It will only take a few moments while we are changing our dresses. Oh, we will have just a delightful time!" and the lively girl laughed merrily.

"Yes, undoubtedly we will enjoy it."

"Do you know, Hilda, I tried to get St. Clair to go into something of the kind with me when I first met her, but, oh, my goodness! her ladyship was not disposed to put herself on familiar terms with me at all. Her highmightiness, the leading lady, could not condescend to take lunch with the soubrette, although she did borrow four dollars from me when we were out shopping together once, and it was a good four weeks before I got my money; then I had to dun for it too." And an expression of lofty contempt appeared on Miss Amherst's face as she finished the sentence.

"It is apparent that you have not a very good opinion of Miss St. Clair," Hilda observed, with a quiet smile.

"Indeed I have not!" the soubrette declared. "She is a horrid, proud, stuck-up thing, and between you and me, and the bedpost, I do not think that she is half as good an actress as she reckons herself to be," Miss Amherst continued.

"She has had the luck to get good engagements and has been smart enough to get into the good graces of some managers who have done their best to push her forward, and that is why she has been able to get along so well."

"Yes, I think you are right," Hilda remarked, thoughtfully. "She is a pretty woman with a good stage presence, but she will never make a great actress."

"No, indeed! She is as far advanced now as she will ever get!"

"I have not had much to do with Miss St. Clair since I joined the company," Hilda observed. "As you have probably noticed, I keep pretty well to myself, but I fancy that Miss St. Clair is no friend to me, although there isn't any reason why she should not be."

"Oh, yes, there is!" Louise exclaimed, immediately. "She is jealous of you!"

"Jealous of me?"

"Yes, on account of Mr. Mortimer. She has been sweet on him for a long time—there has been a regular sort of a flirtation between the two, you know; Miss St. Clair is a horrid flirt; one of the kind who wants to have all the young men at her feet, particularly such men as Mortimer, young, handsome, and talented; he is fond of a good time and so has joked and laughed with her, and although I am satisfied that he never had any idea of marrying her yet she was vain enough to believe she had made a conquest, and as she is one of the kind who cannot brook a rival near her throne, she does

not like you because Mr. Mortimer seems to enjoy your society."

"Oh, but he has no idea of making love to me!" Hilda declared.

"Well, I don't know about that," the soubrette responded. "He certainly takes a great interest in you—a great deal more, if I am any judge, than he does in Miss St. Clair."

"Yes, that may be; but taking an interest in a woman, and loving her well enough to marry her, are two entirely different things."

"That is true," Miss Amherst admitted. "But, to my thinking, you stand a far better chance of winning the man than this stuck-up St. Clair!"

Hilda laughed at the earnestness of the other, protested that she was not anxious to win anybody, and after a few more words of unimportant conversation, retired to her room.

"She is the oddest girl I ever met," was the soubrette's declaration.

CHAPTER XXIX.

MORTIMER DECLARES HIMSELF.

HILDA did not attach any importance to Miss Amherst's words, nor, in fact, did she give them another thought after the conversation ended; but during the next day the subject was forcibly brought back to her.

She chanced to encounter Mr. Mortimer in the parlor.

The gentleman was sitting by the window, reading a newspaper, when Hilda entered.

"Ah, is that you, Miss Serene?" he exclaimed, rising and pushing forward a rocking-chair for her accommodation. "You have come most opportunely, for I was just thinking of you, and wishing you were here."

"Do you possess the wizard's power, then, of making people come when you want them?" Hilda said, with a smile, as she took possession of the chair.

"Oh, no, I do not think I am as highly gifted as all that," the young actor replied. "And, in fact, if we come to talk of wizards, you certainly have shown that you are far more gifted in that line than I."

"Now you are overrating my poor abilities!"

"Oh, no, I was talking with the superintendent of police this morning, and he said that, in his opinion, you were one woman picked out of a million."

"He is extremely complimentary, I am sure," Hilda remarked. "And the next time I meet the gentleman I shall have to thank him, for, as the old saying is, 'Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley is praise indeed.'"

"Oh, he was honest about it!" Mortimer declared. "He asserted that you were a natural-born detective, and it was his belief that if you adopted the calling, you would make a name for yourself second to none in the business."

"That is the life for me, then, if his judgment is correct, for I feel certain that I will never make my eternal fortune as an actress."

"But it seems such a strange kind of a life for a woman to adopt," the young actor remarked.

"Yes, but if I am better suited for that kind of an existence than for any other, I should be foolish not to adopt it," Hilda urged.

"Miss Serene—Hilda!" exclaimed the young actor, impulsively, "there is an existence for you which, I think, would be far preferable to the one upon which you think of entering. Perhaps it is egotistical for me to make such an announcement, though, and that I am considering how it will affect me more than how it will agree with you."

A slight shade came over the face of the girl as she listened to the hurried words of Mortimer.

With a woman's instinct, she anticipated what was coming.

"I feel that I am greatly indebted to you, Hilda, I owe you my life!"

"Oh, no!" she interrupted. "It is not certain that the bullet of the assassin would have been fatal if I had not chanced to interfere with his aim."

"I do not feel so sure about that," he replied.

"The fellow was evidently a good marksman and felt pretty sure he could wing me, or else he would not have attempted to do the trick; therefore I consider that I am indebted to you for my life, and now I am going to ask you to make that life happy by sharing it with me. Hilda, I love you—will you be my wife?"

The girl cast down her eyes and a troubled expression appeared upon her face; she hesitated for a few moments before she replied:

"Mr. Mortimer, it is an honor for any woman to be wooed by such a man as you are," she said at last. "And deeply do I regret that I am not able to return a favorable answer to your suit."

"In the first place, I think that you have made a mistake in regard to your feelings toward me—I feel sure, Mr. Mortimer, that you are of too noble a nature to take offense if I speak plainly."

"Certainly not! The man who cannot bear to hear the truth is not worthy of the name!" the young actor declared.

"That you believe you love me well enough to make me your wife I do not doubt," Hilda

remarked. "But often, under like circumstances, mistakes are made. To my thinking the sentiment which fills your heart is more akin to gratitude than love."

"Oh, no, no!" Mortimer exclaimed, impulsively.

Hilda smiled and shook her head.

"Of course, you are satisfied that you have not made any mistake; that is natural, but I am very doubtful about the matter; it is only a waste of time to discuss it, though, for it is one of those things which time alone can decide. I must admit, though, that I do not think I would be wise to accept your offer with this doubt in my mind, even if I were disposed to do so."

"Put me to the test!" Mortimer exclaimed. "Time proves all things, you know. I am not in a hurry, but am willing to wait. Take six months, or a year, if you like, and if at the end of that time I am still constant then, perhaps, you will come to the conclusion that the sentiment I feel for you is love and nothing else."

"Well, a year ought to test the matter, surely," Hilda replied. "Still, in the case of a man like yourself, who is strictly honorable, it might not be a fair test, for you might deceive yourself, thinking that you were bound to love me, since you had sought to gain my affections."

"On, no; if I discovered I had made a mistake, I most assuredly would be quick enough to admit it. I would not be acting honestly with you to do otherwise."

"That is true; but I am afraid that your sense of honor would lead you to believe that your gratitude was really love," Hilda remarked. "But as this is a point which can only be settled by the lapse of time, it will be useless for us to discuss the matter further at present, and now I will come to another reason which prohibits any thoughts of a union for us."

"As you have probably discovered, long before this, I am not at all like the vast majority of women."

"I ought to have been a man; there is not the least doubt about that. All my tastes are masculine and not feminine, and the best proof of my assertion is the liking I have for the life of a detective."

"I assure you, Mr. Mortimer, that I have never in all my life felt the least spark of love for any gentleman."

"Few girls are there who do not look forward to marriage as being the end and aim of a woman's life, but I never gave a thought to such a thing. From early childhood I have been accustomed to look after myself, and so grew up more like a boy than a girl."

"I will say to you, Mr. Mortimer, in the frankest manner possible, that I like you as well as I do anybody in this wide world, but the feeling that is in my heart is gratitude and friendship, not love, and, moreover, I am perfectly satisfied that I shall never love you nor any other man. Love of that kind is not in my nature. Let us be friends, good comrades, and think no more of marriage that if I were a man instead of a woman," and Hilda extended her hand as she finished the speech.

Mortimer grasped it warmly.

"You are indeed a strange creature!" he exclaimed, "and your frank explanation increases my admiration for you. Now do not misunderstand me; I am not one of the kind to hang my harp on a willow tree and sit down, refusing to be comforted, because the woman I fancied said no to my suit instead of yes."

"If you cannot find it in your heart to become my wife I shall be very glad to have you for a friend and we will be boss comrades, as you suggest."

And a hearty clasp of the hands ratified the compact.

"Well, I am glad we have come to an understanding," Hilda remarked. "It will be much pleasanter for both of us in the future. And now I have a question to put to you which I meant to have asked before, but, somehow, it slipped my mind. Do you know anything about a young girl named Katherine Green?"

"Oh, yes, I think so; that is I know one Katherine Green; she is my cousin; her mother and mine being sisters; but I haven't any idea where she is, for I have not heard of her since I was a child."

"Are you acquainted with the history of your family? Believe me, it is not through any idle curiosity that I speak."

"Oh, yes, I understand that; you are entirely too matter-of-fact to waste your time on trivial matters," the young actor responded with a smile.

"Well, my family history is soon told," he continued. "Throckmorton is our family name and we are of English extraction. I am the son of Agatha Throckmorton, who married James Mortimer. My mother had an elder brother, Nathan Smith Throckmorton, an odd, peculiar man, and twin sisters, Katherine and Martha, who married men named Green and Cauldwell. My father went West, where I was born. Katherine's husband remained here in New York, Cauldwell went to California, and that is all I know about either branch of the family."

"Were either of these uncles by marriage wealthy men?"

"No, they were not at the time of the marriages."

"And this elder brother, Nathan, what became of him?"

"He went South—to Texas, I think, if I remember rightly. It is my impression that my mother got a letter from him in Chicago, written in Texas, when I was eight or ten years old."

"And was he a poor man?"

"No, I think not, but, as I said, he was an odd, peculiar man, who was very close-mouthed about his business. It is my impression that he was pretty well off."

"Do you know if he is living or dead?"

"No; I do not think that after the one letter of which I spoke, my mother ever received any word from him. But I say, Hilda, what is the object of these questions?" the young actor asked, his curiosity excited.

"Perhaps, though, I am acting indiscreetly in asking the question and you may not wish to answer it," he added.

"Oh, no, I am not afraid to trust you," the actress detective answered with a smile. "I am merely blindly groping in the dark seeking some clew by which I may solve the mystery of the attack on you."

"There was a motive for it, of course, and as you have no personal enemy who had reason to wish to kill you, I jumped to the conclusion that it might be possible that you were the heir to some large estate. By accident I frustrated a scheme to abduct this young girl, Katherine, your cousin. There is no reason, apparently, why any one should plot against her any more than against you, but as the same man was concerned in both the attack on you and the attempt to abduct her, it certainly appears as if one party was at the back of both affairs—that a common motive dictated both attempts."

"Yes, that certainly seems so," Mortimer remarked, struck by the force of the reasoning.

"Now out of this scant family history of yours I construct a possible case," the Actress Detective remarked. "This Uncle Nathan Smith Throckmorton prospered in Texas—accumulated a large fortune and died leaving no direct issue. You and Katherine are the heirs to the property, but there is some one else who would come in for the money if you and the young girl were out of the way, and it is this party who has struck these blows at yourself and the girl."

"By Jove! I believe you have hit upon the truth!" the young actor exclaimed. "But who is the party?"

"Ah, now you are asking more than I can tell or even guess, but I have a suspicion that some member of the Cauldwell family, about whom you know nothing, is at the bottom of the mystery, and upon that belief I am going to work."

"Well, if you succeed, it will be a great achievement!" Mortimer declared, and this ended the interview.

CHAPTER XXX.

AN ODD PROPOSAL.

AN hour or so after the termination of the interview between the Actress Detective and Mortimer, Hilda received a message that a lady was in the parlor who desired to speak to her.

Descending to the room, Hilda encountered a dark-faced woman, plainly dressed in black, who looked like a foreigner. Her hair was dark brown, almost black, and thickly streaked with gray, although her eyes were blue, and the contrast gave her a curious look; she was not young, but a woman of fifty or thereabouts, evidently a lady, and well-educated.

"And is this Miss Serene?" she asked, rising as the young actress entered the room, and evincing considerable astonishment.

"That is my name."

"You look much different off the stage," the stranger explained. "I do not think I would have recognized you had we met in the street," and the speaker was studying the face of the actress as she spoke in a way that Hilda did not like.

The Actress Detective did not allow the other to see this, though, but smiled in a placid way as she replied:

"I suppose the footlights and the stage costume do make a deal of difference in one's appearance."

"Will you grant me the favor of a few minutes' conversation?" the lady asked, with stately politeness.

"Certainly, I am at your service; pray be seated."

The stranger resumed her seat, and Hilda also took a chair.

"I have become much interested in you, Miss Serene, from seeing you on the stage," the lady explained. "I am a great theater-goer, when I am in the city, and generally spend two or three nights a week at the theater. I have seen the play in which you appear four times now, and each time became more and more interested in you."

"I am glad to hear it," Hilda replied, with a courteous bow. "Although I must say I wonder at it, for even if I were a much greater

actress than I really am, it would be a difficult matter for me to make any particular impression in such a minor role."

"Oh, you wrong yourself, my dear Miss Serene, and underrate your abilities, I am sure!" the lady declared.

"Oh, no, I know what I can do. I am no novice in the histrionic art, and am fully aware that the greatest actress in the world could not hope to make any particular impression in a role of so small importance as Blanche de Caylus."

"Of course you did not shine as a star, but I am sure that there were few in the audience who did not get the impression that you would have been able to do much better if you had had a more prominent role."

"Well, I am glad to hear it," Hilda remarked, in a placid way.

She was on her guard, for, instinctively, she scented danger.

"You must allow me to introduce myself, and to explain why I took the liberty of calling upon you," the lady continued.

Hilda bowed but spoke not.

"I am a stranger in the city," the lady proceeded, "and, although I do not suppose you would judge so by my appearance, or conversation, I am a foreigner, being a native of Brazil."

"No, I should not have suspected it."

"My father was an Englishman though, and that accounts for my perfect command of the language. Here is my card."

Hilda took the card and read the inscription upon it aloud.

"MADAM MERCEDES CONTIMAN,

Seminary for Young Ladies,

RIO, BRAZIL."

"My school is one of the most flourishing in the empire," the lady explained. "I have room for thirty pupils and am always full. My pupils belong to the best families, for my charges are high, and none but wealthy people can afford to place their daughters in my care. We pay particular attention to the English branches, for among the higher class in Brazil a knowledge of English is considered to be of the utmost importance. My mission to New York is, principally, to secure a competent English teacher, and when I saw you upon the stage the idea came to me that you would be just the lady for the position."

"But I have never had any experience in teaching," Hilda remarked.

"Oh, that does not make any difference," the lady replied, quickly. "A good command of English is about all that is needed, and then your stage training will come in play, for it is necessary that the young ladies should be instructed in polite English literature."

"Yes, I see."

"I am prepared to offer liberal terms, for I am aware that with a lady like yourself it is necessary to make it to your advantage to accept the situation. I am satisfied that you would be a great addition to my school, and it is my wish to make my English branch particularly strong, so I am prepared to offer liberal terms."

"Well, I don't really know what to say," Hilda remarked in a reflective way, apparently pondering over the offer.

"I will give you eighteen hundred dollars a year, with your board and lodging, pay your fare to Brazil and also pay your passage back at the end of the engagement."

"Your offer is a liberal one, and, really, I am tempted to accept it, although I am rather doubtful as to whether I will be able to give satisfaction or not, for I have never tried my hand at anything of the kind."

"Oh, I am perfectly satisfied to risk that!" the lady exclaimed, in the most confident manner.

"And as a guarantee of good faith, as I am an entire stranger to you, I will pay you the first month's salary in advance now, if you will accept it."

"Oh, I don't know!" Hilda exclaimed, apparently much perplexed. "Don't you think that I ought to have some time to think it over? This is so sudden, you know."

"Oh, no; it is really a very simple matter, and one that does not require much deliberation," the lady urged. "You will find me nice and easy to get along with, and after you get to Brazil, if you find that you do not like the position, I will release you from your engagement immediately. You see, I am so confident that you will be pleased with your position, that I do not hesitate to make this offer."

"You are very kind and considerate, I am sure."

"Come! you had better take the advance money, and make up your mind to go," the lady said, persuasively, and she opened her wallet as she spoke, and counted out a hundred and fifty dollars, which she tendered to Hilda.

"You really tempt me to accept!" Hilda declared, a longing look in her eyes, as she looked upon the money.

"Do not attempt to resist the temptation!" the other exclaimed, laughing. "Make up

your mind to go—take the money. The affair is settled, and your mind will be at rest."

"Yes, that is true," Hilda replied, but still she hesitated.

"Perhaps your engagement at the theater prevents you from accepting?"

"Oh, no!" the young actress replied. "There will not be any trouble in regard to that. I am only obliged to give a week's notice. That is the agreement."

"Take the money, say you will go, give your notice, and the week after you can be on your way to your new home."

Hilda seemed suddenly to become inspired with some of the ardor which animated the other, for the look of doubt disappeared from her face. She took the money tendered by Madam Contimar, exclaiming as she did so:

"Very well, I will accept your offer, and will be ready to sail the week after next. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I will give my notice to-night, so the manager will have a full week's warning, and then the week after I will be ready to go with you."

"I am so glad you have come to this conclusion," the other declared. "And I feel satisfied, my dear, that you will never have occasion to regret it. I am sure you will find your position a most agreeable one, for the young ladies will be delighted to be taught by a New Yorker, for we Brazilians are all familiar with the greatness of this city, and few are there among the better class of my countrymen who do not anxiously look forward to the time when they will be able to visit it."

"Of course, the idea seems very strange and novel to me, but I do not doubt that I shall like the position after I get used to it, but I shall really be afraid to say much about the matter to my friends, for fear that I may not be successful in my new venture."

The stranger was quick to take up the idea that the speech of the girl suggested.

"If I were you I would not say a single word to any one about the matter!" she exclaimed. "I would merely state that you are going away for a little while, to attend to some business; that is the truth, you know, and then, after you have made a success, you can write and surprise them all with the news."

"Yes, yes!" exclaimed Hilda, laughing merrily, "that would be a capital idea, and that is exactly what I will do. I will not say a single word in regard to my new departure to any one, then, if I make a success, I can make them open their eyes in wonder, and if I fail, no one will be the wiser."

"In my mind there is not a doubt but that you will be successful," the other remarked, and then, after a few more unimportant words, the Brazilian lady took her departure.

A strange expression came over the face of the Actress Detective when she was alone, and if the visitor could have seen the look it would, undoubtedly, have given her cause for reflection.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN CONSULTATION.

ON the evening of the day on which the interview took place which we detailed in our last chapter, Hilda arrived at the theater at an early hour, and as soon as she got into the building dispatched a note to the manager.

It was merely a request for him to summon the chief of police as she wished to communicate with the official.

Inside of twenty minutes the police chief was in the box.

Hilda, by this time, was dressed in readiness for the play, and was waiting in the passage when the chief came.

It did not take the Actress Detective long to explain why she had summoned the official, and he listened attentively when she related the particulars of her interview with the Brazilian lady.

"Well, I expected that the party would get after you, but I did not look for them to begin operations in this way," he remarked, when Hilda came to the end of her narrative.

"Brazil is a long ways off," Hilda observed, reflectively.

"Yes, and it takes time for one to go there and return. I suppose you have come to a conclusion in regard to the reason for this move?"

"Oh, yes, it is to get me out of the way."

"Exactly; you are a strong witness against this man, Finn, and if you are absent when his trial comes on, it will undoubtedly help his case."

"From the manner of the woman I mistrusted her, although she talked fairly enough."

"Oh, yes; such a salary for such a position is ridiculous," the chief declared. "The chances are great that when you got to Brazil you would find that no such school exists, and this Madam Contimar is a fraud."

"Oh, I came to that conclusion right at the beginning!" Hilda exclaimed. "From what she said, it would seem as if she was to sail on the same steamer with me, but I fancy that at the last moment something would occur to prevent her from going and I would have to go alone."

"I should not be surprised if that was the game."

"Of course I played the part of an unsuspecting woman as well as I could, and I am satisfied that I completely succeeded in deceiving the woman, cunning as she thinks herself," Hilda remarked. "I suspected that there was something wrong about her from the first, and so was on my guard."

"I fancy from what I have seen of you that the party who succeeds in taking you at a disadvantage will have to get up pretty early in the morning," the superintendent remarked.

The Actress Detective acknowledged the compliment with a bow and went on with her recital.

"When the woman said she was a foreigner I mistrusted that she was not telling the truth, and upon examining her closely I became satisfied that she was disguised. Her hair was false, and her skin was stained with some preparation so as to give her a foreign look."

"You are an acute observer," the police chief remarked. "It is a pity that a shadow could not have been put on the woman's track so as to find out who she was."

Hilda shook her head.

"I hope you will excuse me if I doubt the wisdom of this shadowing—that is in the case of an old and expert hand who understands all about such a thing and is on the watch for it!" Hilda remarked. "It is my impression that no shadow, no matter how experienced or skillful, would succeed in tracking such a woman as the one who visited me. Now, I am not well posted in regard to such matters, but I discovered that I was being watched almost as soon as the shadow began his work."

"Well, I don't know but what you are pretty nearly right about this matter," the chief replied. "In the case of an old hand the shadow might not be able to do anything, but as far as you are concerned, you must take into consideration the fact that you are gifted with remarkable powers of observation, and the shadow who would make a complete failure in attempting to track you would be successful with ninety-nine people out of a hundred."

"Yes, I suppose so, but I do not believe any shadow would be able to track my visitor."

"Speculation is idle, of course," the superintendent remarked. "What we have to do now is to look after the future, not bother with the past. What are your ideas on the subject?"

Hilda reflected for a few moments before she answered; then she said:

"Well, I think the best course for us to pursue is to allow matters to go on just as if there was no suspicion that the woman was anything but what she pretends to be. I have agreed to go to Brazil. I will, apparently, keep the agreement. If the woman sails with me, then it will not be so easy to appear to keep the compact and yet in reality break it; but I do not think there is the slightest danger of her going. At the last moment there will something happen to detain her, and I will sail alone. The plotters will think that they have succeeded in their game, and in my absence may grow more bold and make some move which will give us a chance at them."

"You have outlined the proper course to pursue, in my opinion," the superintendent remarked. "While the wily conspirators think you are on the ocean, on your way to Brazil, you will be here in New York, hot on their track."

"Yes; they are evidently anxious to get me out of the way. We must allow them to think that they have succeeded, and in order to still further throw them off their guard, all the shadows that you have now upon their track must be removed."

This was such a radical move that the official shook his head in doubt.

"Do you think that will be wise?" he asked.

"Yes; for the removal of the shadows will make the parties think that the conclusion has been reached that it was a mistake to employ them," Hilda replied. "They will believe that you are satisfied there is nothing to be gained by keeping a watch upon them, and so will be lulled into a false sense of security."

"Yes, that is true enough."

"Then let me try my hand at the shadow business, and if I succeed in discovering anything the watch can be renewed."

"You are right," exclaimed the chief of police, in a tone of conviction. "The removal of the shadows will be certain to make the parties believe that we have come to the conclusion that we are on a wrong scent. That is, if they have been smart enough to detect that a watch has been kept upon them, and keen-eyed enough to see when it is removed."

"I see you do not give these plotters credit for as much ability as I do," Hilda remarked. "But before the game is ended I think you will find that they are extra smart rascals."

"Well, I am satisfied that they are far above the ordinary grade, still, I do not suppose that I am so much impressed with their ability as you seem to be."

"Cunning as they are, I hope to trap them," the Actress Detective exclaimed. And then she

proceeded to explain how she proposed to make her escape from the Brazilian steamer.

The superintendent of police listened attentively, and approved the plan in all its details. Then the Actress Detective handed a memorandum to the chief.

"I desire to learn all the particulars in regard to a certain party," she said. "The necessary instructions are given in the memorandum."

The superintendent of police glanced at the writing and remarked that he would see that it should receive careful attention.

This brought the interview to a close, and it was time, for the musicians had made their appearance in the orchestra, and in ten minutes the curtain would rise.

Hilda gave her notice that night, and it was gladly accepted by the Bolosso Brothers, both of whom were great friends of Miss St. Clair, and that lady had done her best to prejudice the managers against Hilda.

But Mortimer and Miss Amherst were annoyed. Both thought a deal of Hilda, and hated to have her leave.

"The best of friends must part," was Hilda's remark.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HILDA'S LITTLE GAME.

IN just ten days from the one on which the arrangement was made between the Actress Detective and Madam Contimar, Hilda boarded the Brazilian steamer, all ready for her trip to the South American land.

Madam Contimar met her on board of the steamer, according to agreement, and was extremely affable and sweet.

The lady had secured a pleasant state-room, and at once carried Hilda off to look at it, and in the state-room the two sat and conversed until the hoarse cry of "All ashore!" resounded through the ship.

"That reminds me that I must see the steward on a little business," the lady said, rising. "I have some accounts to settle with him, which will probably take me an hour or two. After the steamer gets under way you can go up on deck and enjoy the view as we sail down the bay."

Then Madam Contimar hurried away. Hilda smiled placidly and nodded assent as the lady departed, but she understood the game as well as though she had had the planning of it.

Madam Contimar was going ashore and she had no intention of sailing to Brazil.

In a few moments the lady opened the state-room door again in a great hurry.

"I have to go ashore for a moment, but the captain tells me I have time, for he will wait a few moments for me!" she exclaimed. "Take my bag; it contains my jewelry and be careful of it, for it is valuable. If anything should happen to me on the voyage you must give it to my daughter who will meet us at Rio!" And then the lady hurried away.

"Nicely planned—very nicely planned indeed!" Hilda muttered, a sarcastic smile upon her lips.

"The bag of valuable jewelry and the daughter who is to meet me in Rio are ingenious devices to make me think that everything is all right when I make the discovery that Madam Contimar is not on board the steamer."

"The game has been very well played, but unless I am greatly mistaken I shall be able to give these tricky plotters a Roland for their Oliver."

Again the warning cry "all ashore" rose on the air, and five minutes after, the hawes having been cast off, the engine started and the steamer headed out into the stream.

Owing to the tide the hour of sailing had been fixed at five in the afternoon, so that the shades of night would begin to lower by the time that the steamer passed Sandy Hook and got well out to sea.

After the steamer passed out into the stream Hilda went up on deck.

As she had expected, the Brazilian lady was not to be found.

This discovery made the Actress Detective smile.

"I am to go to Brazil alone then," she murmured. "But has this party calculated that I might take it into my head to return with the pilot when he leaves the steamer at Sandy Hook?"

"Undoubtedly they are too clever calculators not to have taken this chance into consideration. But, probably, they have argued that as I have the first month's salary in my pocket and Madam Contimar's valuable jewels in my possession, that I will not back out now that I have fairly started. And they are right to a certain extent."

"I will not leave the steamer with the pilot, so if they have a watch ready for the pilot-boat when she returns, the report will be that I did not quit the steamer," and a quiet smile of satisfaction came over the face of the Actress Detective as she mused upon the situation.

Sandy Hook was reached, the steamer slackened speed so that the pilot-boat could come alongside.

The pilot descended into the cockle-shell craft which was rowed up to the big ship, waved his hand in farewell, and away went the ocean queen on her way to the Southern seas.

After getting well outside of Sandy Hook she veered around to the southward, and ran along down the coast.

The supper signal sounded.

Hilda made a hearty meal, and when the repast was over, darkness had set in.

The Actress Detective went on deck and sought an interview with the captain.

All the necessary arrangements had been made by the chief of police with this official, so Hilda found that all was smooth sailing.

Off Ocean Grove, New Jersey's great coast resort, the steamer sent up a rocket.

An answering one came from the deck of a small sloop, a mile or so away from the Brazilian liner, and right in its course.

Then both vessels headed for each other, and when they came near, the steamer slackened speed so that the sloop's boat was able to come alongside.

Hilda descended the ladder into the boat fully as nimbly as the pilot had done.

"All right!" came in hoarse tones from the boatman, as he stooped to his oars.

On went the steamer again, but minus the Actress Detective.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

MORE PLOTTING.

AGAIN the Gilded Widow and the crafty Englishman, Brakespear, sat in consultation, and this time the meeting took place in the house in the rear of Alberta Darlington's residence, which had been secured so the conspirators could meet without danger of attracting the attention of police spies.

It was some ten days after the sailing of the steamer upon which the Actress Detective had taken passage.

"Well, how goes the game?" the Gilded Widow asked.

"Splendidly!" the broker replied. "I have succeeded in making the acquaintance of Mortimer, and by playing my cards well have got on exceedingly intimate terms with him. I am posing as the soft-headed man of business who takes a great interest in the drama, and has a sneaking suspicion that he would be a great actor himself if he could only get the chance."

"Ah, yes, I see."

"Of course I have professed to be a great admirer of this gentleman, and as I have taken particular pains to stand well with him, he is inclined to be extremely friendly with me."

"Under the circumstances it ought not to be a difficult task for you to win his confidence, particularly if you took pains to tell him what a great man you considered him to be," the Gilded Widow remarked, sneeringly.

"Well, now, you are wrong about that," the other remarked. "If I had played the game in that way I should not have made my point, for he is not that sort of man at all."

"Not egotistical and vain like the majority of his class?"

"No, singularly unassuming and modest. Very much of a gentleman, in fact, and I am sorry that he stands in our way so that we are obliged to crush him."

"Yes, that is one of the evils of this world," Mrs. Darlington observed, thoughtfully. "We humans are like the birds, beasts and reptiles—always at war with each other. The strong prey upon the weak, and little mercy is there for anybody."

"Yes, it is the course of nature, and when the thin veneer of civilization is stripped off the savage barbarian is revealed beneath."

"A truce to moralizing!" the Gilded Widow exclaimed. "We are playing a game for a prize of a million of dollars and we cannot afford to look with disfavor upon any plans by means of which we can win."

"True. To resume my account then: I am satisfied that I have succeeded in gaining the confidence of the actor and when the time comes I shall not have any difficulty in getting him to take a little trip with me."

"That is good, and I congratulate you upon your success."

"Well, how did you make out?"

"Oh, I was fully as successful in my task as you was in yours," Mrs. Darlington replied.

"If you succeeded I ought not to have been less lucky for my task was by far the easier of the two, for while you were dealing with an experienced man of the world I had only a weak, unsuspecting girl to hoodwink."

"Yes, that is true."

"And in order to fully gain her confidence I went to live at her boarding-house, representing that I was a widow from the South who had come to New York to look after some property in which I was interested."

"That was a story calculated to disarm suspicion," Brakespear remarked.

"Yes, the truth of the tale was not doubted by any one. I did not represent that I was wealthy, but only comfortably well off; if I succeeded though in gaining the property, which some un-

principled relatives of my late husband were trying to keep from me, I would be quite rich."

"Such a tale would be likely to create sympathy."

"Yes, it did, and as I was so frank and unreserved in my statement, no one had any suspicion that I was anything but what I represented myself to be."

"The girl herself took a lively interest in my story, and was anxious that I should succeed. It did not take me long to get on the most intimate terms with her, and being a simple, unsuspecting creature she made a confidante of me. Not that she had much to confide, for her life had been a plain and uneventful one, the episode of the uncle who had so unexpectedly returned from California, and unexpectedly disappeared when his coachman came in contact with the police, being the only bit of romance in her life."

"And I suppose she was greatly puzzled by the circumstance?"

"Yes, she did not know what to make of it, and her friends in the boarding-house to whom she had confided all the particulars of the affair were equally at a loss to explain the matter."

"I do not wonder at that, for the affair was certainly mysterious enough."

"The conclusion to which they arrived, after much deliberation, was that the man was her uncle all right, but he had got in with evil associates, and his story of having acquired wealth in California was not true; if he had any money it had been gained by criminal practices, and the arrest of his coachman had caused him to seek safety in flight for fear of being hauled before the bar of justice."

"A natural conclusion," Brakespear commented. "But the girl and her friends must have been puzzled as to the reason why he should take the trouble to hunt her up."

"Yes, they were, and it was the impression that no good motive urged him on."

"Under the circumstances it was not strange that such an inference should be drawn."

"It was a bad business from beginning to end!" Mrs. Darlington declared with a shake of the head. "And when I look back upon the affair it seems so strange to me that the two attempts should have failed so utterly."

"Well, I am not inclined to be superstitious, but it seems to me that this actress, Hilda Serene, as she calls herself, was a sort of an evil genius to us."

"It certainly does look that way," the Gilded Widow asserted. "She interfered in the Mortimer affair, and then again when the girl was safely in the snare."

"Yes, and it was very strange indeed that circumstances should have rendered it possible for her to have interfered in both matters."

"It is the unexpected that always happens," you know," Mrs. Darlington replied. "That is a very old saying, and an extremely true one. I am like you in regard to not being troubled much by superstition, but as far as this young actress is concerned she certainly seemed fated to interfere in our plans."

"She is out of the way now though," Brakespear observed in accents of satisfaction.

"Yes, and if you have observed, everything has gone well ever since she departed."

"Very true; by the way, I had neglected to mention it, but the shadows who have been keeping watch upon me have been withdrawn," the broker remarked. "It is twelve or fifteen days now since I have been able to detect that any one was playing the spy upon me."

"And I have the same report to make," Mrs. Darlington observed.

"And what inference do you gather from the circumstance?"

"That the men who put the watch upon us have become satisfied that they were on the wrong scent."

"You do not think that the spies have been withdrawn in order to lull us into a false sense of security?" Brakespear asked, thoughtfully.

The woman gave a start of surprise; her face became grave and she reflected upon the matter for a few moments before she made a reply.

"No, I do not think so," she replied at last.

"What put the idea into your head? Have you anything to go upon?"

"Oh, no, not a thing; it is but a bare suspicion on my part."

Mrs. Darlington's face brightened.

"You take a weight off my mind. Upon my word! you frightened me for a moment!" she declared.

"You know that I am of an extremely suspicious nature and am apt to think, 'each bush an officer,'" Brakespear remarked.

"Oh, you are altogether wrong, to my thinking!" the Gilded Widow declared. "It was a blunder on the part of the police authorities to put a watch on us, but, in their bewilderment, not knowing which way to turn they struck out at random, as it were, anxious to find some clew to the mystery. By means of the real estate transaction, we were brought to their notice, and some wisacre Jack-in-office suggested that a watch should be placed upon us, in order to see if we could be detected in any crooked work."

"Yes, I think your judgment is correct,"

Brakespear replied, in a reflective way. "Most surely there was not any reason why any suspicion should attach to us."

"Certainly not! It was, as I have said, a blind groping in the dark, but as it did not produce any result, we can afford to laugh at the affair, particularly as everything promises fair for the future."

"Yes, and as the actress is gone there is no danger of her suddenly appearing to confound our schemes like the good fairy in the pantomime."

"That is true, and I am ready to admit that her departure takes a weight off my mind, and since she has been gone, fortune seems to favor us; you have succeeded in getting on good terms with the young actor, while the girl looks upon me in the light of a bosom friend, and then a rare piece of luck happened to me day before yesterday."

"In connection with our schemes?"

"Yes; listen and you will see how intimate is the connection. I was stopping in one of the Broadway stores two days ago when a young lady left her handkerchief on the counter by my side. I picked it up and called to her; a card dropped out as I did so."

"Naturally I read the inscription upon the card. It was Agatha Cauldwell, music-teacher; and then, as the girl came toward me to get the articles, I had a good view of her. There was something about her face which seemed familiar to me. She was above the medium height, finely formed, but not pretty, for her face was rather coarse, and her complexion dark and ugly. She was very well-spoken, though, and thanked me in the most amiable manner for troubling myself about the handkerchief."

"The name, Agatha Cauldwell, impressed me, then, too, as the likeness to some one whom I had once seen, but for the moment I was not able to recall the particulars. I seized upon the opportunity to get into conversation with her, for the thought came to me that it was possible that in this strange way fate had thrown in my path one of the Cauldwell heirs. If you remember the name of the elder sister, the mother of this actor, Mortimer, it was Agatha."

"Yes, I remember; all the details of the affair are firmly fixed in my mind."

"I told the young lady that I had taken the liberty of glancing at her card, and was glad that I had done so, for I once knew a lady named Cauldwell, who was a very dear friend, and I had a curiosity to know if she was any relation to her, for I fancied I could discern a likeness in her face to the features of my old-time friend, and then I added that her name was Martha."

"And this girl was Martha's child!" Brakespear exclaimed, jumping at once to the conclusion.

"Yes, you are correct. She immediately answered me that Martha was her mother's name, and then I soon ascertained that she was indeed the one whom I supposed her to be, the only heir of George and Martha Cauldwell."

"It was indeed a lucky meeting!"

"I pretended to be overjoyed, of course, and insisted upon the girl's coming to take lunch with me, and during the repast I had no difficulty in learning all I wished to know."

"Martha Cauldwell had had three children, but she, the eldest girl, was the only one living; both father and mother were also dead."

"She had been brought up in San Francisco, and educated for a music-teacher, but as she had a hard time to get along, she had come to New York; her main reason for coming to this city being that she expected to find her uncle, Nathan Throckmorton, here."

"Aha! This girl, then, is aware that she has such a relative?"

"Yes, and has no suspicion that he is dead. It seems that a few years ago, Nathan wrote to this sister, Agatha's mother; told her that he was a wealthy man, and if she ever needed any assistance to apply to him. The letter was written in New York—Throckmorton was evidently on a business trip here at the time, and the Cauldwells fell into the error of imagining that his home was here."

"That was natural under the circumstances. The girl then came to the city in search of her wealthy relative?"

"Yes, and was very much amazed that she was not able to find any trace of him, considerably put about too by the fact, for she had not much money with her when she came, and although she had advertised and tried in the most diligent manner possible to get pupils yet she had not succeeded in getting a single one."

"No easy matter for a stranger to come to a big city like New York, where every avenue is crowded, and secure an occupation immediately," the gentleman remarked.

"The girl confided all these particulars to me without the slightest reservation; a more frank and open-hearted creature I don't think I ever encountered, and yet there is something about her—a latent power, as it were, which crops out every now and then, which makes me think that she would be a dangerous enemy if fairly roused into action."

Brakespear had been deep in meditation while Mrs. Darlington was speaking, and now, rousing himself from his distraction, said:

"It seems to me as if we control every point in the game now."

"I think we do."

"The three known heirs are so we can get at them; a single bold stroke and we remove all obstacles which intervene between you and this colossal fortune."

"Yes, that statement is correct."

"And it seems to me that the quicker we strike the blow the better."

"True! we cannot gain anything by delaying the stroke."

"That is my idea, and, in anticipation, I have got everything in readiness, thinking the time would soon come when action must be taken."

"It was a wise precaution."

"On the east bank of the Hudson a little way above Yonkers there is an old house which the Brotherhood of the Invisible Hand have used as a headquarters for a year past. It is in an isolated situation and being easily approached from the river has made an excellent rendezvous for us."

"Now, my idea is to decoy these heirs to this old house, and there, at one fell swoop, settle their earthly accounts."

"Yes, it must be done!" the woman declared, in a low, deep voice, after meditating over the matter for a few moments.

"If there were any other way by means of which the property could be secured," she continued, "I would not advocate taking any such desperate step as this, but as far as I can see there is none."

"None," he replied, with a solemn shake of the head.

"We must embark in this scheme then."

"Yes, I will decoy Mortimer to the old house. He is fond of sport and I have told him what splendid fishing there is at my place up on the river, and he has agreed to go with me some night after the performance is over, stop at my house, so as to be on the fishing-grounds early in the morning."

"And while he sleeps the deed will be done?" Mrs. Darlington observed, in low, constrained tones.

"Yes, and then we can give the body to the river. I can manage the matter so that no suspicion will attach itself to me."

"And I will manage to decoy the two girls there on the same night, only earlier in the evening, so that their fate can be settled before Mortimer arrives."

"We must select some night when the ebb-tide begins to run, about ten o'clock," Brakespear remarked. "In two of the rooms there are trap-doors beneath which are the waters of the river so that the bodies can be easily disposed of, and if they are shot into the tide about midnight they will be carried down the stream so far by morning that no one will be able to decide that they came from above the city."

The scheme will work and the great prize will be easily won!" the Gilded Widow declared, exultantly.

It was a dark plot indeed.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

IN THE NIGHT.

It was not a difficult matter for an arch schemer like Mrs. Darlington to entrap two young and innocent girls, neither one of whom had any suspicion that she was anything but what she ought to be, yet the Gilded Widow had to proceed cautiously, for the matter must be so arranged that after the girls' disappearance no one would be able to connect her in any way with the affair.

With Agatha Cauldwell, a stranger in the city, without friends, the task was comparatively an easy one.

She told her that a friend of hers, who lived in the upper part of the city, wished to see her in regard to music lessons, and would send her coupe to carry her to the house.

The Californian at once jumped at the chance, and at seven o'clock on a certain evening departed in the carriage.

The plan of operations by which Agatha Cauldwell was to be made a victim was extremely simple.

On arriving at the house she was to be met by the butler and escorted to the parlor.

She was to be asked to be seated until the lady should come down. Upon the table was a tiny decanter of wine and some sweet cakes.

The butler was to fill out a wineglass full of the wine, and invite the young lady to refresh herself while she waited.

If the girl drank her fate was sealed for the wine was drugged, and the moment she became insensible, down through the trap-door into the waters below she was to be hurled.

With Katherine a different plan was to be adopted.

Mrs. Darlington, in her assumed character of the Southern widow, pretended that she had received a love-letter from some unknown admirer, who craved the privilege of making her

acquaintance, and gave as a meeting-place a certain street in Harlem.

She pretended to be indignant at the impudence of the proposal, but said she was curious to see what the fellow was like, and asked Katherine to go with her, not intending to keep the appointment, but to survey the man from a distance.

Of course she bound the girl to strict secrecy, and arranged the matter so that she and Katherine did not leave the house together, but met at the Elevated Railroad Station.

At Harlem, at the appointed place, no man at all answering to the description was to be seen, and then Mrs. Darlington suddenly remembered that there was a very dear friend of hers living on 155th street, and she asked Katherine to make a call with her.

There was a carriage at hand, the same coupe which had conveyed Miss Cauldwell to the old house, and the supposed Southern widow made a bargain with the coachman.

In the two got, and away they drove, halting at last at the old house.

The butler was to receive them, say his mistress was up-stairs, and press them to be seated, and take some refreshment, while he summoned the lady.

Mrs. Darlington was to press the drugged wine upon Katherine, and then, when the liquor had done its work, down through the trap-door she was to go, to an awful death in the waters beneath.

But when this scheme came to be carried out, there was a slight hitch in it.

The butler was absent, but as the door was ajar, Mrs. Darlington pushed it open, saying:

"We will play a surprise-party on my friend, and astonish her."

It was the Gilded Widow's thought that the confederate, who acted the butler's part, had not been on the watch, and so had not noticed the approach of the coach.

When she got to the parlor, finding that the man was not there, she became a little anxious, but as there was a wine-glass, with the dregs of wine still in it, on the table, showing that some one had lately drank from it, she calculated that all had gone on as arranged, and that the confederate had gone down-stairs, to make sure that the water was in the cellar, for there were tide-gates, by means of which it could be shut out.

Under these circumstances she resolved to press Katherine to take a glass of wine.

"Everybody is up-stairs, I guess," she remarked. "So much the better, for the surprise will be greater," and she laughed, merrily. "Come! let us have a glass of wine and a cake, Katherine, and then we will have a good joke on my friend, for I will tell her that we could have carried off the whole house and no one would have been the wiser."

The girl laughed, for it appeared to her as if it was an excellent jest to walk into any one's house and take complete possession of it in this way, and she accepted the wine that Mrs. Darlington offered her without the slightest hesitation, and then they both sat on the sofa and sipped the wine, nibbling cakes between the sips. But Mrs. Darlington only pretended to drink.

"Now this is what I call real comfortable," the Gilded Widow observed, inwardly wondering though as she spoke as to what detained the confederate who acted as the butler.

"Yes, it is very nice, but isn't this wine strong?" Katherine had drank about half her glass by this time.

"Strong? Oh, no, I do not think that it is strong; it is real mild and delightful!"

"Oh, my, it has gone to my head and is making me so sleepy," the girl murmured, half closing her eyes.

The drug was beginning to take effect.

The Gilded Widow hastened to take the wine-glass from Katherine's nerveless hand.

The girl was sitting near the head of the sofa, and as her senses began to leave her, Mrs. Darlington arose and guided Katherine's head so that it rested upon the sofa pillow.

"There is number two out of the way, and if we do not have any more trouble with number three we may consider ourselves lucky!" she exclaimed, as she gazed in triumph upon the helpless girl.

A slight noise like a faint sigh attracted the Gilded Widow's attention.

She turned and to her amazement saw the girl who had called herself Agatha Cauldwell, standing in the doorway.

The face of the girl was so placid and marble-like that at first it was Mrs. Darlington's belief that some mistake had been made in the execution of the plan, and the girl was walking in her sleep—the sleep produced by the drug administered in the wine.

"What is the matter, Agatha?" she asked, advancing toward her.

"Nothing is the matter, so far as I know," the girl replied. "Everything is all right, although your little game is not working exactly as you intended."

The speech almost took the breath of the Gilded Widow away; it was as if a veil had suddenly been taken away from before her eyes.

"What does this mean?" she cried, in hoarse accents.

"Can you not guess?" and the girl laughed contemptuously as she put the question. "You, who are so extremely clever in plotting, should be equally clever in detecting that your schemes are not working the way they should."

"You miserable wretch! you are a police spy in disguise!" cried Mrs. Darlington, in a perfect frenzy of rage.

"Yes, that is true enough, and I am not on my way to Brazil, either!"

The Gilded Widow gave a great gasp, rage and mortification combined.

"You laid an extremely cunningly-arranged trap for me, but it did not work. I laid one for you, and it has succeeded admirably."

"You devil!" the Gilded Widow hissed, and from her pocket she plucked forth a revolver, but Hilda Serene, for the supposed Agatha Cauldwell was the Actress Detective, was on the watch for just such a movement.

With the quickness of a tiger she sprung forward, grasped Mrs. Darlington by the wrist, and with a single twist of her muscular arm disarmed her prisoner, the Gilded Widow being as helpless in that grasp of iron as a rat in the jaws of a terrier.

Then, before the other could recover from the shock of the attack, Hilda took a pair of handcuffs from her pocket and snapped them upon the wrists of Mrs. Darlington.

"There, now, you are all right!" the Actress Detective exclaimed. "You are not able to do any damage either to yourself or anybody else," and as she spoke she forced the Gilded Widow back and seated her on the sofa by the side of the drugged girl.

"Oh, you devil! I will have your life for this!" the infuriated woman cried.

"Softly, softly! spare your breath; threatened people live long, you know," Hilda replied.

"Then, too, you must remember that it will probably be some time before you will be able to do any damage to anybody, for I think I have got such a clear case against you this time that you will be sure to go to Sing Sing for a good term of years."

The breath of the entrapped woman came thick and hard.

"What can you prove against me?" she cried, defiantly.

"Attempted murder? You sought my life, the butler tried to persuade me to drink a glass of wine, but I recognized the man in an instant; it was Finn; again fate had ordained that I was to baffle his work. I made him a prisoner and have talked so forcibly to him that he has half-a-mind to turn State Evidence, but as he would not tell me all I wanted to know, I put him to the torture until he yielded, so I know the game which was to be played here to-night as well as you do. You wished to kill me because you thought I was a Cauldwell; who, as well as this girl and Mortimer, are the heirs of the Texas millionaire, Nathan Smith Throckmorton. I had the chief of police send to Texas and get the information."

"What is it to me?" the Gilded Widow cried.

"You are a Throckmorton also. The cable has put us in possession of your English record and your conspiracy is laid bare."

Mrs. Darlington now took refuge in sullen silence; Hilda did not trouble her, but communicated with the police without, who were in ambush around the building, and preparations were made so that Brakespear was made a prisoner without resistance when he came with the actor Mortimer about midnight.

The astonishment of the broker was great and at first he indignantly demanded to know why such an outrage should be committed, but when confronted with the Actress Detective and her prisoner, Mrs. Darlington, he, as the woman had done, took refuge in moody silence.

The prisoners were put in a carriage which started for Police Headquarters, but on the way both of them managed to swallow poison, and when they arrived in Mulberry street were senseless.

The police surgeons tried restoratives, but all in vain, and after due process of law had been gone through the bodies were surrendered to their friends.

Our tale is told.

The actor and the shop-girl inherited the fortunes which the plotters had tried so hard to gain.

But Hilda kept in the background, and none but a few prominent officials knew who had hunted down the conspirators.

She had achieved her wish; she was now one of the secret police, and there was work ahead, too, for the Brothers of the Invisible Hand were not yet exterminated.

THE END.

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